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Seeding an e-learning community

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THREE students run around the school with strings and measuring tapes, a notebook and pen, and a look of importance. They record the circumferences and diameters of various circular everyday items in sight - the well-polished alloy rim of a car, the brim of a red pail and the horn of a big hailer.

A calculator is produced and the measurement of the circumference of each circle is tapped in, which is then divided by the diameter.

A consistent relationship of around 3.14 is established.

This scene is from a video, one made by a teacher participating in the e-Learning for Life project sponsored by Coca-Cola and coordinated by the United Nations Development Programme.

Since the project was introduced in March last year, some teachers of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Tunku Anum in Jitra, Kedah, have been shuffling between classrooms with piles of scruffy exercise books in one hand - and a slick white Apple iBook in the other.

The nine-year-old school, about 10 minutes' drive from the Sultan Abdul Halim Airport in Kepala Batas, is one of six schools in the peninsula selected by the Education Ministry for the implementation of the project.

The pilot project complements the country's smart school programme.

Mohamed Kadri Mohamed Taib, Coca Cola Far East Ltd's public affairs and communications director, points out that the teachers, and not students, have been equipped with high-tech equipment.

The beverage company provides an assembly of ICT infrastructure - wireless local area network (LAN), a server, five laptops, three computers and other paraphernalia including a digital video camera - all for the teachers' use.

They plan and prepare virtual teaching materials such as PowerPoint presentations and video clips and upload them on to the project's portal. Just before class, the lessons would be downloaded into laptops and projected on the screens set up in the classrooms.

"The teachers have been given the task to improve the learning experience of the students, mostly from rural and peri-rural areas, and maintain their interest in studies through innovative teaching tools and methods," Kadri says.

Early last year, 60 teachers from the six schools involved in the project attended a two-week course at the Regional Centre for Education in Science and Mathematics in Penang.

Mohd Jafri Omar, math and accounts teacher, finds it hard to hide his enthusiasm regarding the project. The maker of the "Circles" video clip is a newly IT-savvy teacher. "The students will never forget this (the lesson in the video), even after the exam is over," he says.

More importantly, he notes that he is able to maintain the attention of the whole class for the entire period.

Video clips do take more effort and a longer time to prepare. In terms of preparation, previously, he had only to lay out a weekly plan for his lessons in a record book.

His students, whose parents are farmers, army personnel and involved in small businesses, are excited about the project too.

"They want to stay back after school and help me with the video. They volunteer to produce all the items needed and appear in them."

With such support from the students, Jafri just has to plan the clip

and roll the camera.

"It takes about an hour and costs nothing - just belanja minum (buy drinks)."

Jafri also holds casual meetings with math teachers from two other participating schools in the northern zone - Seberang Perai Utara, Penang, and Grik, Perak.

They meet to discuss the progress of the programme and swap teaching materials saved on VCDs.

"Currently, the portal can't save video clips," he says, explaining the need to meet up in person even though they constantly keep in touch over the Internet.

"Moreover, it is a good excuse to go down to Penang for a family picnic," the father of two adds.

Efforts are under way to flesh out the portal, which currently holds 200 files of lessons for various secondary school years, with another 100 files to be added by the end of the year.

The three math teachers from the northern zone have agreed to upload two chapters each of a subject on the portal, making a pool of six for swapping purposes.

As with all things "e-", the programme is flexible.

"Teachers involved in the programme, including those from Malacca, Johor and Pahang, can download lessons, make minor changes to localise them to suit the class he or she is teaching," Jafri says.

The portal houses all teaching and learning resources produced by teachers from the six participating schools.

Prior to this, teachers would have to write the lessons on the blackboard at every class. But with the introduction of ICT in the school, Form 5 Math questions and solutions are in the form of PowerPoint presentations.

Technology-infused sessions create a different learning environment which can be manipulated to adjust to individual learners. It can also be customised and made relevant for different situations.

A lesson on World War II, for instance, is no longer just a teacher spewing out dates and facts in point form.

Students see actual newsreel black-and-white footage of the bombing of Pearl Harbour. This is followed by recent scenes of Afghanistani and Iraqi victims of war.

It takes a special sort of teacher to make literature interesting and for the students, a high level of perseverance to go through the books in a reading list.

At SMK Tunku Anum, the students receive added impetus. They get to view a VCD of important scenes and dialogues from books.

Form 3 student Norsyahirah Mohd Kamarudin says that e-learning is not only fun but she now also grasps concepts much faster.

"Geography is such a daunting subject for me. You study about foreign countries, the whole world... it is really hard," she sighs.

"But with visual aid, it is much easier to understand."

Plans are afoot to use the six schools as ICT hubs for community projects as well.

In Grik, the teachers from SMK Batu Empat is supporting a development initiative launched last year to promote eco-tourism in Hulu Perak.

The teachers will train eco-tourist guides in professional digital video-making skills. The course for the first 20 youths is expected to take place next year.

Coca Cola is happy with the progress of the project. Things learnt from it will be incorporated into a similar programme that the company plans to undertake with UNDP in Bolivia, Kadri says.

Perhaps before the Kubang Pasu wakil rakyat's next visit, Jafri could teach the kampung AJKs to use the iMac for an ICT presentation to augment briefings for him? This is especially so when he happens to be the IT-savvy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dri Mahathir Mohamad himself.