

15

Distance no longer a barrier to education

by Ron James

These are exciting times in information technology and in education as we work towards the creation of a global village united by information technology. A bit scary, perhaps, because some of the old ways seem to be crumbling so fast. But this is also encouraging, as we begin to develop the potential we have seen, for so long, in erasing distance as a barrier to learning and sharing and caring.

Part of the excitement is that we have entered an era in which there are more questions than answers. And it's the questions that really make us think.

For instance, what happened in a large, sparsely populated US western state. The state department of education had made a commitment to get every public school hooked up to a information computers network to facilitate communication among teachers, between teachers and subject matter experts, and other resources in the world beyond.

They convinced teachers, administrators and school boards how wonderful it would be to have these links. But even after they'd convinced them, the project was far from easy. This is a sparsely populated state. It's also very rugged and largely undeveloped, so building the network was a major challenge.

The last school to get hooked up to the information network was so isolated that it had to use a satellite link to a ranger station, and then string some wire to the school. Finally they made it. The next morning, the state administrator for electronic education checked his e-mail. There was a message from the teacher at that finally connected school. The message was: "Where is all the stuff?"

Definitely a question to make us think, and to remind us that there's more just "wiring the world" for information technology. In our zeal to develop the potential of information technology many have overlooked the need to teach the teachers how to use it. And, in our zeal to build tomorrow's "information superhighway," we have almost forgotten that today's information two-lane road can get a lot of people where they want to go. We must work harder on making the most of what we have now, and teach the teachers.

These are also the concerns of my company. And while we don't pretend to have all the answers, we have made some efforts through our government services organization and

in education initiatives of the US WEST Foundation.

Because a number of primary and secondary teachers in the United States have almost "zero" experience with computers, we could put fiber to the classroom and still not help them a bit. So we started a program we call the US "Teacher Network." It's sort of "computer camp" for classroom teachers who've had little or no experience with computers, and moderns. University instructors give them a concentrated course. The teachers are sending us e-mail thank-you notes and navigating the World Wide Web on the Internet.

One Colorado teacher wrote: "Who would have thought that in one I've made new friends all over the world and found wonderful sources of information. I'm communicating with teachers from all over setting up a sharing list of techniques, projects and events." This was from a teacher who previously thought computers were for

typing papers or balancing budgets.

Another programme we've initiated through our foundation is connecting educators and family-service professionals to databases; subject-matter experts; and one another in interactive conferences. Most of the participants in this programme did not know to use computers, but not on-line resources. They are amazed, but more important, they are doing a better job for the kids and families they serve.

Recently we discontinued our "outstanding teacher programme" in which we awarded cash grants for implementing new ideas in the classroom and replaced it with a new award. Instead of individuals, this award will go to teams of teachers, not more than four persons, for developing projects that reach beyond the classroom walls, using information technology. The projects would actively involve students.

We expected a few dozen applications from the 14 states served by US WEST. We got more than 2,000.

They were so good that we increased the number of awards from one per state to five.

These teams are not waiting for fiber optic cables, or new laws; just a little equipment and encouragement.

Of course, many teachers already navigate the electron highway, and have fantastic ideas to go more places in it. Our foundation has a programme for them, too. We asked for proposals from university-based schools of education to collaborate with local elementary and secondary schools to develop all-new multimedia education projects.

In this programme, a Midwest college proposed linking the public schools in a small midwestern town with the schools on a southwestern Indian reservation for intercultural, multimedia, distance learning studies of writing, math, social studies and technology. We're funding nine of these projects, to the tune of 300 thousand dollars apiece, and consider it a darn good investment.

Also, we're even into "virtual reality", funding three vans that will take virtual reality education projects to secondary schools across the West.

So we feel very good about the work we're doing, through our foundation, to link our corporate goals with society's goals. And we would encourage other companies to do the same.

Behind the flood gates of universal services for telecommunications is not necessarily "a whole new way of life," but, at least an exciting new tool-kit to help us live the lives we're trying to live today, but often coming up short on time, opportunity, or patience.

Nowhere will that tool-kit be more useful than in education. Today, students must live within commuting distance of a school, or move there, living in a dormitory. Tomorrow with interactive video networks, those students will be all over the world, as will the faculty. If you're in education, this means a new tool-kit for you, too. It means you need to be spending more on communications systems and services, then on bricks and mortar. It means you need the right infrastructure on campus and the right connections to the world beyond. It means you need to be learning new ways of teaching, and teaching new ways of learning.

We stand on the edge of an exciting frontier. It's up to us to make the most of it, to reach new heights be reaching everyone.