

Passaic Valley: Where the Videoconference Is the Textbook

Bringing high school social studies to life

By MICHAEL YAPLE

In a classroom at Passaic Valley High School, 18 students sat transfixed at two video monitors at the front of the class. On the other end of the connection was a trio of widows from Afghanistan, who spoke through a translator about the devastating effects they suffered, economically and socially, after losing their husbands in the war-ravaged nation.

“In that country, widows are very vulnerable to abuse and shunning,” said social studies teacher Kathleen Menake, adding that one widow had her child taken away by her late husband’s family. “The honesty of the conversation was hard to take without tearing up.”

At one point during the videoconference, a student from the school approached the microphone to address a question specifically to one of the Afghan widows who hadn’t spoken. He asked her to share her vision of the future. “She began to speak about her hopes for the future ... and then she burst out crying,” recalls Menake. The stunned students sat in silence. Then the translator explained what the widow was saying: “She said she really had no hope,” recalls Menake. “Then it sunk in.” Then Menake watched her entire class, from the shy girl to the tough football player, “all of my students cried.”

That scene, from 2009, is one of many that play out in Menake’s social studies course, “Contemporary Issues Through Videoconferencing.”

When Menake arrived at Passaic Valley High School several years ago, the school’s technology officials were encouraging teachers to take advantage of the newly built, but little-used videoconferencing room. Menake recalls her thoughts: “I



didn’t know too much about technology – I was really a textbook teacher – but I figured why not?” Her first effort was a video “visit” with her class to the United Nations in 2004. Four years later, what had started as a mere supplement to her social studies course has transformed into the actual course itself.

The program – unique in that the videoconference is the tool, or the “textbook,” for lack of a better word – earned Passaic Valley High School an NJSBA School Leader Award for 2010.

One thing Menake found crucial to establishing the program was the support from all levels of the administration. “I happen to have a principal and superintendent who were both social studies teachers,” she said. “They were very supportive, and so was the board of education.”

In order to gain entrance into the demanding elective, junior and senior students must be interviewed and apply with an essay and teacher recommendations. Throughout the school year, the students will delve into as many as three videoconference programs in one week. Other times, they might go for two weeks without a videoconference, instead studying world events and performing research for upcoming conferences.

Their virtual field trips take them around the world. They watched (live)

a total knee replacement, with the ability to ask questions of the surgeon during the process. They connected with college students at Nile University to discuss the Egyptian uprising.

They have studied nuclear plants, superbugs, Darfur and United States border issues. Every year the course content is different and students study a variety of issues.

Then there was the program on the Afghan widows. The emotional program in 2009 taught Menake to inform her class before every videoconference: *Anything* can happen. Her class returned to do a second interview with the same trio of widows in 2010. By this time, international aid organizations had helped provide them with basic trade skills. “They were doing better,” said Menake. “They weren’t out of danger of living in poverty, but they had acquired some skills.”

Besides watching her students build a global perspective, Menake discovered another positive byproduct of the course: Students leave with a strong sense of professionalism and poise. They know how to handle themselves. After all, you don’t interview leading surgeons or talk with overseas war widows without first doing your homework.

“They feel they can be confident,” Menake said of her students, adding that they are better prepared to step into college or the job market. “Isn’t that what you want for your students? You don’t always learn that from a textbook.”

For more information on Menake’s course, go to <http://citvs.org>. **sl**

Michael Yaple is NJSBA’s public affairs officer. He can be reached at myaple@njsba.org.

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