



Press Articles

TES

31 October 2008

Cross-curricular worlds move closer

A charitable networking project is giving pupils and teachers a chance to make hi-tech international links

By Helen Ward

SOME 450 schools in the UK have signed up to a new charitable website that will allow pupils and teachers to communicate with their counterparts abroad via email, instant messaging, forums and video-conferencing.

The website Rafi.ki – Swahili for “friend” – has 900 schools registered in 94 countries.

It works like a social networking site but also allows schools to work on cross-curricular projects.

So far it has linked up with organisations including Médecins Sans Frontières in a project on Darfur, and with the Fair Trade Foundation for work on ethical trade.

Rafi.ki has a range of projects, such as one on the 1960s.

The site also enables schools to create its own projects.

One group getting involved is from King John School in Benfleet, Essex.

Hina Robinson, head of geography and a teacher adviser for Rafi.ki, said: “We used the Darfur project. A lot of our pupils had never heard of Darfur, so it was a bit of a shock for them to find out what was happening there.

“We also did a podcast with a school in Serbia. [The country] had been through its own civil war and so had a bit more empathy with what was going on in Darfur.

“I knew the teacher in Serbia was interested to see how pupils worked on it.” The new key stage 3 curriculum introduced in Year 7 this September requires schools to include a cross-subject “global dimension”.

The aim to expand young people’s awareness of global issues goes back to 2004, when the then Department for Education and Skills published its Putting the World into World-Class Education strategy, which sets out eight key concepts pupils need to know (see panel), and launched the International Schools Award, an accreditation scheme.

Rafi.ki was launched in January 2007 and became the focus of research earlier this year by Richard Shotton, a freelance expert on the use of ICT for international collaboration based at Manchester Metropolitan University.

He analysed questionnaires from 148 teachers in 46 countries, and 393 students in 32 countries.

Mr Shotton found that almost all the teachers said Rafi.ki helped to motivate students; 55 per cent said it had a very significant impact on the most disengaged learners.

Nine out of 10 students logged on to the website both in and outside school – a quarter of them checked it every day.

Rafi.ki was most commonly used in modern foreign languages and geography classes, but was also used often in design and technology, maths and science.

John MacNutt, director of Rafi.ki, said: “It helps schools find a partner, talk to a partner and work with a partner. We had two new countries join last week – Nepal and Algeria.

“Schools tend to start with one class, then use it more and more across the subjects. There is lip service about the global dimension and making it work across the curriculum – this brings it alive.” The website is one of three projects run by Gemin-i.org – a charity that specialises in using IT to enhance education and international development.

All communications on the site are monitored.

Membership costs £750 a year.

Eight key concepts of global education

Citizenship	Social justice
Sustainable development	Diversity
Values and perceptions	Interdependence
Conflict resolution	Human rights

Young traders have business off to a T

At the project launch Rafi.ki... a website that enables pupils... around the world to meet together... The idea was for pupils to link up... together, learning, research and... the platform to design a 'T-shirt'... then asked them from 100 pupils... to England who would manufacture... and ship their goods... The project was welcomed by pupils... and they were taught to use the site...

Schools working with them have already been contacted and... Rafi.ki was launched in January 2007 and became the focus of research earlier this year by Richard Shotton, a freelance expert on the use of ICT for international collaboration based at Manchester Metropolitan University.

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Webinars

- www.rafi.ki
- www.thetimesonline.co.uk
- www.gemin-i.org

The Rafi.ki revolution:

is your school on board? Schools all over the world are rushing to sign up to this new educational tool. Annie Makoff speaks to Rafi.ki director John MacNutt and online facilitator Chris Llewellyn to find out why

It is eight pm on a school night. An eleven-year old from London is learning about Darfur with an eleven year- old from Romania. Meanwhile, in Norwich, a fourteen-year-old is working on a magazine with a thirteen-year old from New Delhi, India. This isn't time travel at its most effective: this is Rafi.ki and it just may be coming to a school near you.

Imagine a global community where everyone has something to give and contribute. A community that is made up of people from all over the world: as far away as Australia, and as hidden as Tajikistan. A place where ideas are shared, friendships are formed, and culture, religion and social class are not just accepted but celebrated. If it sounds like some sort of far-fetched utopia, you couldn't be more wrong.

Because this is just what Rafi.ki is and what it stands for: and for the thousands of schools that have signed up to the community worldwide, it is a reality.

Rafi.ki was started just two years ago, initially set up as a charity collecting textbooks from British schools and sending them to East Africa. But when students began requesting links for pen pals with the schools they had partnered with, the concept of an online community was born.

Rafi.ki enables schools to work together

and share a vast array of projects all based around the national curriculum. By the use of video conferences, chat rooms and image and photograph exchanges (to give just a few examples) pupils can actively participate in the learning process, all in entirely safe surroundings. And of course, Rafi.ki takes pupil safety extremely seriously.

Everyone using Rafi.ki is issued with their own username and password and all staff are checked to confirm they are teachers at the school.

Every conversation is moderated by facilitators, and any use of abusive language is automatically reported and looked into. “Rafi.ki is seen as a walled garden,” says online facilitator, Chris Llewellyn. “It is rigidly password protected and any breaches of the code of conduct are dealt with in conjunction with the relevant teacher.”

At the time of writing, 1100 schools from over 100 countries have signed up to the global community. Schools in the UK pay the subscription fee, (this covers the cost of the moderators and facilitators who ensure child safety is a number one priority) but the service is free for any school outside of the UK.

According to Rafi.ki director, John Macnair, there are three overarching aims of Rafi.ki. One: to raise attainment across all subjects in the curriculum; two: to bridge social, cultural and religious divides and three: to ensure pupils are equipped with a range of essential skills to set them up on their career paths. "We wanted to provide a long term solution where scho-

could create a long lasting partnership”

John explains. And Rafi.ki is certainly destined to be long-lasting. At such a politically sensitive time in international terms, it has never been more crucial to teach children about religious and cultural tolerance.

Nothing demonstrates this better than the large amount of communication between children from a school in Iraq and from the USA. “They were eager to work with the American children,” Chris Llewellyn explains.

"This really shows how bridges across cultures can be made. And it was reciprocal. It was lovely to see."

Certainly, neither John Macnutt nor Chris Llewellyn could have predicted the huge impact Rafi.ki would have on the teachers and pupils that use it. No one could have guessed that 96 per cent of teachers would report that Rafi.ki has increased motivation and learning in the most disengaged students, or that more than half of students using Rafi.ki would become online friends with overseas students, or that 38 per cent of students¹ use Rafi.ki outside of school hours. And perhaps the most astonishing of all are the huge improvements in learning and achievement of pupils with special educational needs.

Eddie B² is in year 11 at Belfairs High School. He has atypical Autism and has a statement of special educational needs. Due to his condition, Eddie found it difficult to socialise with his peers and struggled to communicate and read verbal and nonverbal signs, such as facial expressions and body language. His condition was affecting his confidence and self esteem and no doubt would cause problems as he progressed through adulthood. But Eddie was introduced to the world of Rafi.ki.

From the start, it proved a great success. Due to the nature of virtual communication, typed communication is wholly literal. Subtle modes of speech such as sarcasm or irony cannot be picked up through text: to convey a feeling behind words, emoticons or pictures are used. Such a means of communication suits Eddie perfectly, and it is this literal communication that has caused his confidence in himself to soar. He is now an ambassador for Rafi.ki at his school and helps teachers and online facilitators with the site. His tutor, Melanie Hopgood says: "Rafi.ki has enabled Eddie to develop his communication skills. It is an environment where he feels safe and in control." And having an element of control is something that many people with Autism need. If a

situation becomes uncomfortable, Eddie is able to navigate away from the webpage, without fear of feeling victimised, or he can simply take his time when responding to online messages which he couldn't do during face-to-face conversations.

“Because Rafi.ki eliminates the need for interpretation of body language and tone of voice, it is extremely helpful for students with social issues.”

John Macnutt explains. And since Eddie is given the responsibility to moderate chatrooms and other online conversations within Rafi.ki, his own confidence in social situations outside of Rafi.ki has soared. Melanie Hopgood adds: “the responsibility that the facilitators have bestowed upon him has played a large part in this development. Rafi.ki has had an extremely positive effect on him.”

And so it is with many children with special educational needs. Children with dyslexia, dyscalculia, ASD, ADHD etc. can all benefit from the skills that Rafi.ki teaches and develops. Simply by enabling a child to learn with others from a wide range of different countries about many different topics, learning becomes a different experience altogether. Learning becomes fun. “Rafi.ki takes away obstacles facing SEN students in their social and educational experience”, Chris Llewellyn says.

Headmaster Martin Crabbe of Glebe Special School, Bromley, agrees. "Rafiki is giving our students the confidence and motivation to develop their learning at a pace that suits them." He says. Rafiki, by its very nature, is multifunctional.

Children can improve their foreign language skills dramatically by conversing with other children from around the world, they can improve their geography skills by working with a number of global schools, and by working with other children on a whole host of exciting and challenging projects, those who would otherwise struggle in the textbook-style of lesson are thriving in key subjects initially thought too much for them. Through the realms of Rafi.ki, children share knowledge and discuss aspects of the national curriculum they would not otherwise have done. And on some projects, children have video conferences with experts or specialists from a particular field, where they can ask them questions about their area of expertise. Rafi.ki is a wholly interactive medium.

Perhaps one of the reasons for Rafi. ki's success with children is that the concept is familiar to them. Being of the Facebook and Bebo generation, children are comfortable experimenting with the

different mediums available within Rafi.ki. Yet, unlike Facebook, the Rafi.ki community provides a deeper experience. Chris Llewellyn recalls a talk he gave at a local school, and remembers the show of hands when he asked how many pupils had used Facebook to communicate with their peers. “But when I asked how many of them had met new people from Facebook, the show of hands fell,” he explains. “People use Facebook to catch up with friends and have fun, but that is all. With our community, you can do this and more. You can learn about global issues, you can meet new people. With Rafi.ki, you are going somewhere.”

But let's not forget the benefit Rafi.ki has on special needs children overseas. Rafi.ki has inspired Headmaster Youssef El Assali of the Al Massira school in Morocco to integrate children of all abilities within the school and ensure they are proficient in IT systems. And Dushanbe Deaf School in Tajikistan is set to join the Rafi.ki community later in 2009.

No matter where a school is situated – an ill-equipped school in Maldives or a bush school in Kenya, Rafiki's flexibility enables access to any school connected to the internet.

Currently, Rafi.ki benefits children from 11 to 18. But launched as early as March of this year, a primary version of Rafi.ki, known as Rafi.ki Kidogo will be available for children of five years and up. And although Rafi.ki was launched in order to improve children's learning, the very nature of the community means that teachers and other educational staff greatly benefit from the network too: they can speak to other

teachers from across the globe, compare lesson plans and experiences, discuss future projects and make new friends. The learning opportunities available are infinite.

Rafi.ki brings together people from all over the world. Teachers engage with teachers, students with students. Projects are worked on, friendships are formed. Achievement levels are rising. You could say it's fast becoming a revolution. And most encouraging of all, is that children with special educational needs are not just thriving from using Rafi.ki, but exceeding expectations.

“SEN children no longer have to feel like they are SEN children,” John Macnutt says. “They are as good as or, in some cases, outperforming their peers. Rafiki has created a level playing field.”

And with such a playing field like Rafi.ki, textbook-learning is certainly a thing of the past.

1 Students who participated in
Rafi.ki's phase one study

2 In keeping with Rafi.ki's child
protection policy, we have not printed
Eddie's surname to protect identity

[illegible][illegible]

11 December 2008



INTERNATIONAL LINKS



Rafi.ki is a not-for-profit scheme that aims to help schools connect to their counterparts across the globe. Henry Warren explains

A TDF Training and Development Agency for Schools' adverts regularly remind us, teaching is a profession that allows talented people to connect with the younger generation, using their skills to draw out the latent abilities that will underpin students' ongoing life choices.

However, as anyone who has spent time in the classroom knows, the reality of delivering inspiring, curriculum-relevant classes day-in, day-out, can be quite a challenge.

Rafi.ki – which means “friend” in Kiswahili – is an online global community for schools that makes this goal easier to achieve. Teachers are supported through structured, cross-curricular projects, covering a diverse range of topical issues such as citizenship, Human Rights, climate change, and conflict prevention, which come complete with lesson plans, expansion activities and additional resources.

Rafi.ki allows teachers to partner with overseas schools on various activities, while many use the staff forum to share experiences and discuss issues with peers.

The main aim behind Rafi.ki is to improve attainment and bridge national, religious and social divides, and the community is already home to members from over 1,000 schools in 100 countries.

All online communities become more vibrant and stimulating as the membership base grows, and for this reason silver membership is free to all. At this level, schools can create their own profile page, find international partners, swap lesson plans, undertake a selection of projects and utilise all the teacher-led communication tools including audio and video-conferencing.

Rafi.ki is a not-for-profit initiative so, although gold membership does incur a fee for UK schools, the proceeds are used to fund similar access for those in the developing world, increasing diversity and creating a more fulfilling learning environment.

Among other benefits, this enhanced level allows pupils to create individual profile pages and talk to children across the world in a less formal manner. In today's climate of concern over the dangers posed by young people's online conversations, Rafi.ki presents an opportunity for this age group to enjoy social networking in a safe and fully-moderated environment.

Of course, all of this is only interesting if the technology is actually having a positive effect on the learning experience – for both

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Connecting schools

Humanities teacher at the King John School in Essex, believes that the opportunity to be part of the Rafi.ki online learning community is too good to miss.

She explained: “Pupils here live a sheltered life and pay little attention to world news. Rafi.ki gives students the opportunity to see other people's perspectives on life and the difficult situations they have to survive. I want to turn our young people into global citizens and open their minds to the wide range of situations around the world.”

Lawrence Sheriff School in Rugby recently undertook a project through Rafi.ki, in conjunction with Plan International, which addressed the problem of modern day slavery.

One of the students involved in that project was deeply touched by the experience.

They said: “If I'd read about this in a book I'd have thought that's just history and nothing to do with me. If I'd read about it in the newspaper as happening now, I'd think that they had made it up to sell more papers. Either way I would forget about it quickly.”

“Using Rafi.ki we had the chance to find out if other people around the world had any views on slavery or had been affected by it. It was like a huge conference. Now I know that it's true and that together people around the world must stop it. I won't forget that.”

• Henry Warren is the CEO of Rafi.ki. Visit www.rafi.ki

INTERNATIONAL LINKS

Rafi.ki is a not-for-profit online community designed just for schools. It was created by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, the Department for International Development, and the James Hutton Foundation.

enabling schools to work with each other simply and effectively across the world. Rafi.ki provides a series of structured cross-curricular projects that cover areas such as: climate change, conflict prevention, recycling, modern foreign languages, and creative writing.

However, the charity behind Rafi.ki, has structured the community to provide support and allow for the sharing of ideas and experiences. Schools are encouraged to find a partner in another country and work through projects together, providing a truly international dimension to all activity. The system contains a built-in communications centre, with varying elements that can be selected depending on the needs of the school.

Schools wishing to see Rafi.ki in action can visit the main site at the RFI Show, which runs in London from January 14 to 17. Schools that sign up to other membership at the show will be entered into a prize draw to win annual gold memberships. Visitors can also take a video-conference between a partner UK and overseas school, during which students and teachers will discuss a range of topical issues.

“Using Rafi.ki we had the chance to find out if other people around the world had any views on slavery or had been affected by it. It was like a huge conference. Now I know that it's true and that together people around the world must stop it. I won't forget that.”

• Henry Warren is the CEO of Rafi.ki. Visit www.rafi.ki