

Leveraging Student Passion and Vision

By Ed Gragert

As adults we often speak about how kids can make a difference and indeed they can, but all too often, we do not provide the kind of leadership that motivates and opens paths, and at the same time liberates young people to make the kind of difference that they envision. Further, they are frequently not able to see how their “difference” actually affects change in the larger global community. I can cite numerous examples of students engaging in meaningful community activities, only to conclude that what they accomplished was insignificant in light of the scope of the problem—even in their local community, to say nothing in the immense global community.

I fear that students (and perhaps all of us) will tire of trying to address such critical issues as climate change because the excitement they feel about the global mobilization of individuals and groups to address greenhouse gases may not lead to observable and measurable results nationally or globally. Young people are leading the way in campaigns to use less energy, increase recycling and reduce their carbon footprints. Yet, we read (and I’m sure they read too) that a meaningful reduction in greenhouse gases will barely stabilize the negative environmental impact of decades of abuse. How long can motivation be maintained in the light of such news? Can they really make a difference if we’re all just treading water? It’s hard to avoid the fear that they’re just arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

We have a responsibility as adults to help young people to examine root causes of planet crises, something that is at the heart of Kids Can Make a Difference, as well as leverage their activities to generate further impact and to provide tools to enable them to see and believe that they are able to exponentially connect with the work of other young people in neighboring towns, other states, and even far away countries and truly know that they are doing more than standing still.

This is at the heart of iEARN. Since 1988 we have worked to create online means for young people to connect with like-minded and committed peers anywhere in the world to create exponentially-large communities of change using technology. Although many tout the benefits of the Internet in giving access to amazing amounts of information, the truly revolutionary power of the technology is in its ability to connect humans for community-building and collective action. Social networking websites are realizing the former, but few actually are working in the latter.

Even fewer are working with young people in communities that have limited or no access to the Web. iEARN remains committed to engaging the voices, minds and energies of young people, regardless of their technology access through innovative bridges between different levels of technology. This enables those with 24/7 broadband access to hear the voices and knowledge of those who have minimal dial-up e-mail access somewhere in a community telecenter or cybercafé.

We are excited by the partnership between iEARN-USA and Kids Can Make A Difference and look forward to giving tools to an ever-increasing number of young people to work together, regardless of where they live, to address global issues.

Ed Gragert is Executive Director of iEARN-USA. He may be contacted at ed@us.iearn.org