Kids, teachers learn to think 'technology'

Institute projects mix math, writing

By Sara Cunningham
scunningham@courier-journal.com
The Courier-Journal

Jonathan Tran and Ankur Kanotra may not have received grades for the skeletons and dragons they created as part of a computer-generated world last week, but the two Meyzeek Middle School students have big plans for using their new skills on school projects during their sixth-grade year.

"The point is that we're learning how to try and make things in 3-D," Jonathan said. "You have to know stuff about math and about thinking about things, like how things move all the way around."

Jonathan, 10, and Ankur, 11, were among about 85 students from Jefferson and surrounding counties who participated in this year's Pepsi Summer Portfolio Institute at the University of Louisville last week.

The institute, which began about 13 years ago, is a place where students entering grades four through eight and teachers of elementary through high school classes creatively combine math and writing skills, often using technology that would intimidate the average adult.

About 15 teachers from Jefferson, Hardin, Bullitt counties in Kentucky and from Floyd County, Ind., spent three days planning a weeklong list of activities for students. The teachers receive college credit toward continuing their education and everyone involved gains a great deal of experience, said Todd Brown, a U of L professor who has led the institute for about five years.

"We're trying to create a link between math and writing concepts using fun technology," she said. "For students and for teachers, this is just a snapshot of what they can do when they get back to their classrooms."

On Thursday, Jonathan and Ankur were using Alice, a program that allowed the students to create a kind of animated movie in which their characters can move and interact in a three-dimensional world. Students learn how to write simple computer programs to make it work.

"This is just a snapshot of what they can do."

TODD BROWN,
U of L professor

"It can be a good project for us in school," Ankur said. "It has Egypt in here and pyramids and all kinds of stuff. It would still be a lot of work like other school projects, but this is way more fun."

In other classrooms, students and teachers used graphing calculators to visualize what happens as they time a bouncing ball, employed animation programs and storyboards to create Claymation movies, and used computers to work out story maps before composing reflective writing assignments.

Chanel Acklin, 9, hasn't started fourth grade at Jeffersontown Elementary yet, but she already knows how to use PowerPoint because of the institute. Her group took up-close photographs of themselves, combined them in a slideshow and had other students guess which photo was of which student, she said.

"That was pretty fun, but using the calculators is pretty hard because sometimes I forget things," Chanel said. "I'm glad I can do this though, because I'm pretty nervous about fourth grade and maybe since I've done it a little now, it won't be so bad."

Lisa Wathen, a fourth-grade teacher at Bullitt County's Freedom Elementary, worked with Chanel and other students using the graphing calculators one day last week.

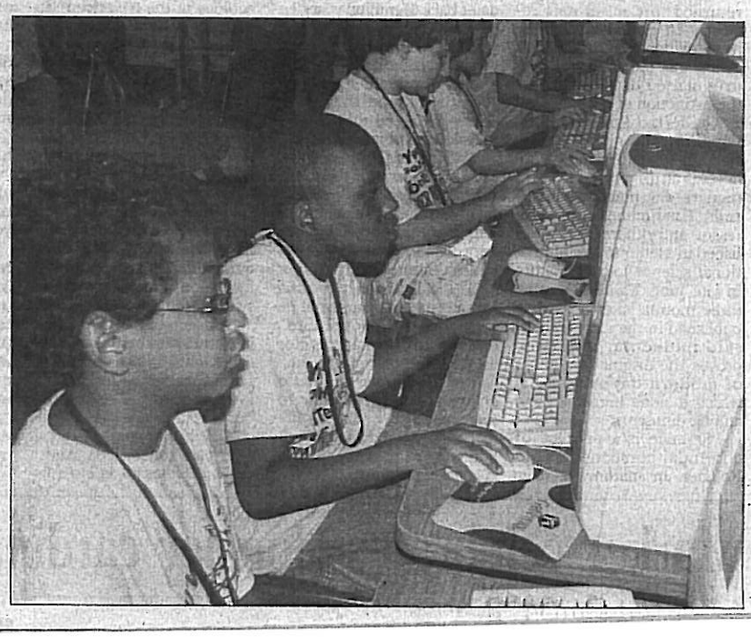
"I didn't realize when I became part of this that fourth-graders would get so into it," Wathen said. "It's also an opportunity for me to collaborate with other teachers."

This was Wathen's third summer participating in the institute. After her first summer, she said, she used ideas from the program in her classroom. She also decided to offer students a chance to start a computer club.

"It's really taken off," she said. "I love working with them and then watching them figure things out. They teach me things now."

Reporter Sara Cunningham can be reached at (502) 582-4335.

Photos by Sarah Cunningham, The Courier-Journal

▲ Henry County teacher Lori Cobb helped students work on storyboards to create movies during the Pepsi Summer Portfolio Institute at the University of Louisville. The institute encourages students and teachers to creatively combine math and writing skills, often using technology.

▼ Brown School sixth-graders David Samwaru, left, and Bryan Cockroft created story webs to gather ideas for a writing assignment. The institute began about 13 years ago.