Learning Virtually – by Design

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From this session, take home our easy step-by-step guide for using online technology to engage your students’ interest in learning and thinking constructively. The Natureshift (NS) “Exploration Model” makes students think and we are also proving it because students are showing us that it’s true. From this session, you will take home our easy step-by-step guide for applying the NS Exploration Model to your classroom, building learning experiences that will help your students pick an individual path to their own learning. Apply this simple technique in your classroom and you will have two guarantees as a result: 1. Students will be engaged and 2. Students will process for you what they learned. You even get a little extra - your students will apply new technology creatively and appropriately in their thinking.

After five years and $5 million building our Exploration Model and testing it with teachers as well as informal educators, our project is beginning to find evidence of learning. We suspect the learning we see in students might prove to be long-term, but that cannot be known until long-term studies assess what we achieved. Nevertheless, we know student thought processes are engaged. We know students show evidence not only of content acquisition but also of higher order thinking. A NS Exploration Project is by nature summative and forces the application of higher order thinking by design. A project engages students because its challenge is authentic to their lives. Learners of any age will pursue their own curiosity about genuine concerns in their world. The result is that a student project will reveal the full extent of what has been learned. The project is constructed from the building blocks of knowledge acquired through the Exploration journey. Because it requires the use of new technologies, students can now teach others what they know and what they have learned more engagingly and more thoroughly. S.A. Barab, et al. in their recent publication “Constructing Virtual Worlds: Tracing the Historical Development of Learner Practices” (Cognition and Instruction, Nov. 2001) confirm the power of local resources and collaborative learning on student constructed knowledge using virtual technologies (pp 47-90).

What is this model and what does it do? It will engage your students’ interest. It will guide him or her along a path of self-inquiry in search of new knowledge. Half of that path will take the student on a Web Quest after research information. The other half of that path requires students to quest after this new knowledge in the world around them, at home, at school, in the community. When the student has completed an Exploration, he or she constructs meaning from what was studied, applies it in a self-designed project, and teaches others what was learned. Along this learning path students are given opportunity to employ technology to their tasks. They learn by actively doing. They succeed by having fun. They investigate their lives by satisfying their natural curiosity. You will find it hard yourself to have as much fun again playing with a learning model in your classroom.