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**The World at our Doorstep:
Evaluating an Internet-based Social
Studies Programme**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education
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Abstract

If young people are to know how most of the world lives, to understand the problems faced by developing nations, and to see people in other countries and situations as real, whole people, they need more than figures and news reports. Internet-based programmes in the virtual field trip style are being increasingly used to enable students to experience other places and cultures without leaving the classroom. However, to date there have been few evaluations that examine whether these programmes have the intended impact on student learning and attitudes.

This thesis examines one such programme, the *Ethiopia Connection* run by World Vision New Zealand during March 2001. The programme was evaluated using a theory-driven evaluation methodology. First, a programme theory was derived from the literature and from the expectations of participant teachers. Factors identified as central to the success of the programme were interactivity, active learning, student choice, collaboration, access to experts, integration of several aspects of a topic, authenticity and ease of use.

Next the implementation of the programme was observed. A total of 296 schools and over 20,000 students participated in the *Ethiopia Connection*, with varying patterns of involvement according to factors such as internet access, time available and teacher skills. Lastly the impact of the programme was evaluated in terms of student learning, attitude change and participants' perceptions of the programme. Despite the inherent difficulties in evaluating learning in a programme so dependent on teachers' differing implementations, and in assessing attitude change over short time frames, there were strong indications that the programme succeeded in its goal of developing understanding and compassion for people in the developing world.

As a result of this evaluation, the programme theory outlined above was confirmed. Recommendations are made for future World Vision internet programmes, for internet-based social studies programmes in general and for future research directions.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Few New Zealand children and young people have the opportunity to travel outside their own country. Their impression of the world is shaped by their own experiences, with the assumption that “everyone lives the way we do”. Fleeting glimpses of another reality on the TV news or in social studies classes can seem unreal, and it becomes easy to ignore or judge other societies for their difference. Yet 1.8 billion of the world’s people live on less than US\$1 a day (World Bank, 2001), while 18% have no clean water and 39% lack any form of sanitation (UNICEF, 2002). If young people are to know how most of the world lives, to understand the problems faced by developing nations, and to see people in other countries and situations as real, whole people, they need more than figures and news reports.

A class trip to Rwanda, Ethiopia or even India is impossible, for reasons of cost and safety. However, a virtual field trip can allow students to experience the lives of people on the other side of the world without leaving their classroom. Better still, communication technology can add to the experience by allowing students to exchange messages with young people like themselves in the places they are studying. This has the potential to create a dialogue among children and young people from very different countries and backgrounds, creating partnerships between young people in New Zealand and overseas, giving a voice to the poor and strengthening the ties of the global family.

This reasoning was the impetus behind a series of internet programmes produced by World Vision of New Zealand, an international aid and development agency, for use in New Zealand schools. The programmes began in 1998 and have proved popular, with between 125 and 300 schools participating each year. With research, writing, design, programming and management, these internet connections represent a significant cost to World Vision in time and money. While some limited evaluations had been done for the first three programmes, it was decided to conduct a more thorough evaluation of the 2001 programme, the *Ethiopia Connection*, in order to gain information on which to base

decisions on any future programmes. Since internet-based programmes, and especially virtual field trips, are becoming increasingly popular in schools, it was hoped that this evaluation might also contribute to filling a gap in our knowledge of the outcomes of such programmes.

This thesis outlines the evaluation of the *Ethiopia Connection*. First, the programme itself is described, and set in the context of the definition of a virtual field trip. Next, in Chapter Two, the theoretical basis of the programme is outlined, leading to seven key requirements for an effective internet-based social studies programme. Chapter Three examines the various evaluation methodologies, and the reasons for choosing a theory-based evaluation design for this study. The data collection techniques are described in Chapter Four, and the results of these are presented in Chapter Five and discussed in Chapter Six. The conclusions from this evaluation, both for future World Vision internet programmes, and for the wider knowledge about the effectiveness of virtual field trips, are described in Chapter Seven.

1.1 The *Ethiopia Connection* - Background

Every year, as part of their development education initiatives, World Vision New Zealand runs an internet-based social studies programme for New Zealand schools. The programme links students with aid workers and young people in a developing-world country. To date these programmes have focused on a community in rural Malawi (July 1998), a street children's centre in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia (March 1999) and child families in Rwanda (March 2000). The latter two programmes have provided an additional education focus for the 20 and 40 Hour Famine, an annual fundraising event in which New Zealand young people go without food for either 20 or 40 hours (depending on their age) to raise money for needs in the developing world. Approximately 150,000 young New Zealanders raise a total of over two million dollars in the Famine each year. Most participants register through their schools. The link between the Famine and the internet programmes enables schools to make Famine participation more educationally relevant to their students and

allows students to learn about and communicate with some of the very people they are raising money for.

The World Vision internet programmes all share a basic outline. They consist of six main aspects:

1. An internet site, which gives students a broad range of information on the country and people being studied, and which includes several interactive elements – puzzles and/or games, daily stories, a chance to ask questions and have the answers appear on the site, and sometimes a chance to communicate directly with children in the focus country.
2. A free teacher unit, with background information, instructions for using the internet site, curriculum links (mostly for social studies at levels 2 to 6) and ideas for learning activities.
3. Weekly faxes to registered schools, from someone in the focus country.
4. Weekly audioconferences allowing students to submit and then ask questions live. Normally 6 to 10 schools ask questions each week, but dozens of other schools listen to the call.
5. A free poster, with photos, quotes, activities and curriculum links.
6. A video and resource folder that schools can choose to buy, if they want a more detailed unit to complement the internet-based activities.

The *Ethiopia Connection* ran from March 1st to 31st 2001 and was designed essentially along the same lines as the previous three programmes. It focused on food security in Ethiopia. Figure 1.1 shows the *Ethiopia Connection* homepage.

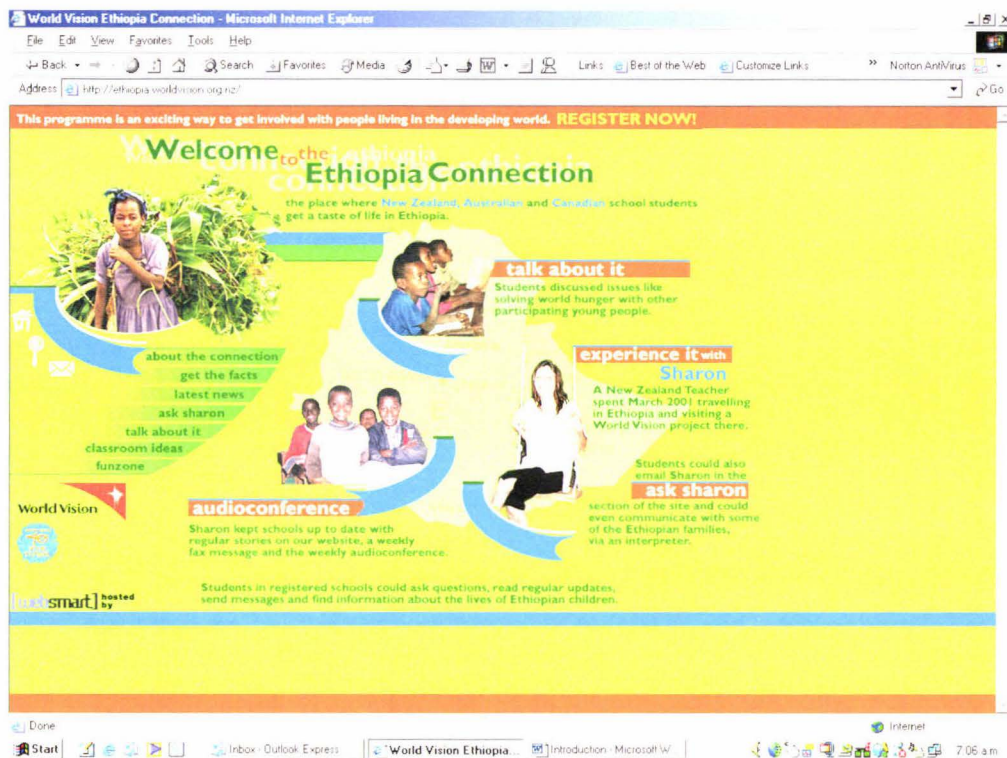


Figure 1.1 Homepage of the *Ethiopia Connection*

The *Ethiopia Connection* aimed to achieve the following objectives.

1. To educate New Zealand children and young people about food security issues in the developing world, especially in Ethiopia.
2. To change students' and teachers' attitudes towards Ethiopians (and towards people in need in general), so that they recognize them as people like themselves, who are intelligent and active in their own futures.
3. To challenge the common perceptions of Africa as out of control, hopeless, unrelievedly poverty-stricken, the cause of its own problems.
4. To increase the educational potential of the Forty Hour Famine.
5. To give teachers an easy-to-use, attractive resource so that they can create exciting, student-centred, deep learning experiences for their students.
6. To encourage more schools to participate in the Forty Hour Famine, and to raise more money for those who participate already.

The *Ethiopia Connection* differed from the 1999 and 2000 programmes by linking students with a New Zealand teacher as she travelled to Ethiopia. In contrast, the Mongolia and Rwanda programmes had linked directly with World Vision staff in the focus country. However, this had proved time-consuming for the staff, and had meant that stories and answers were not always written to the right language or interest level for New Zealand children. It was therefore decided to select a teacher for the task of fronting the programme. This teacher was chosen by application on the basis of previous developing-world experience, and their writing, speaking and photography skills.

In preparation for the programme, registered schools received a colourful poster with photographs of drought and agriculture in Ethiopia on the front and information and brief teacher notes on the reverse. They also received a unit with syllabus links, instructions for using the website, schedules for the faxes and audioconferences, activity ideas for levels one to six and background information on the topic. A copy of this unit is included as Appendix I. Together these two items provided enough resources for teachers to create a unit and make good use of the website. Those wanting a fuller unit could also purchase a folder and a related video, both of which included an in-depth case study of a family.

The successful applicant travelled to Ethiopia from late February to late March 2001. While there, she visited tourist sites, and spent time in a rural World Vision project, meeting families, observing project activities, especially those relating to food security, and interviewing project workers and community leaders. Via the internet, faxes and audioconferences, students heard about the teacher's travels, and were able to communicate with her, with some of the World Vision workers and to a limited extent with some Ethiopian children. Figure 1.2 shows the Latest News page of the website, where the travelling teacher posted stories about her experiences.

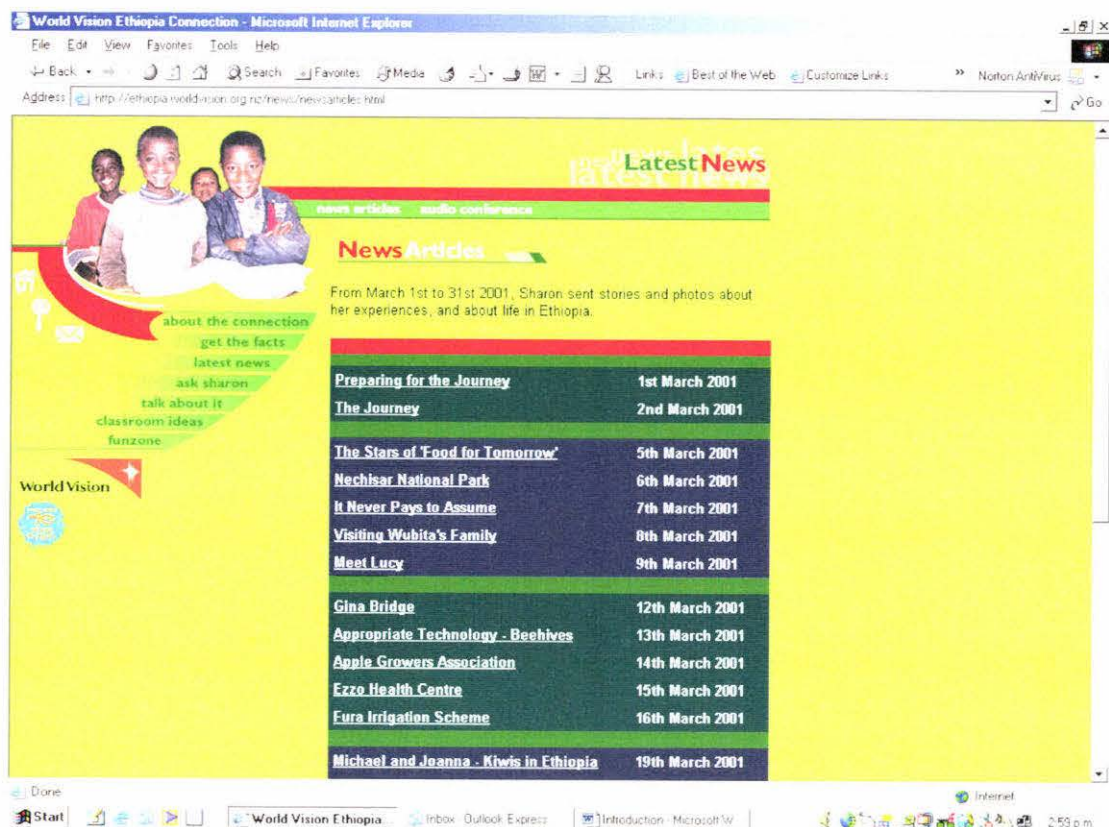


Figure 1.2 Ethiopia Connection Latest News page

The travelling teacher also communicated through weekly audioconferences and faxes (see Appendix II) and by answering students' questions. These were categorised into questions about Ethiopia, about the Saatusa community (where the family from the folder and video lived), about hunger and about World Vision's work. Figure 1.3 shows one of the 58 pages of answers to questions about Ethiopia.

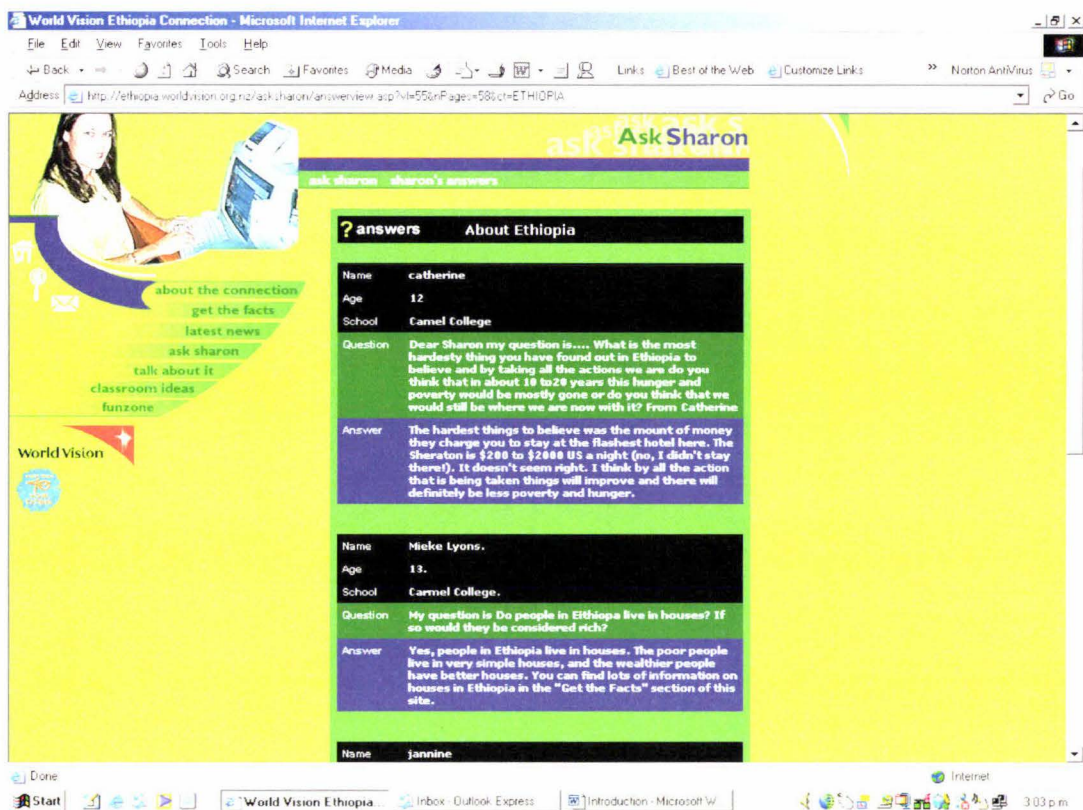


Figure 1.3 Ethiopia Connection Ask Sharon page

As well as communicating with the travelling teacher, students could also communicate with young people in Ethiopia. This happened through a Get in Touch section, where students could send personal messages to three children in the Saatusa area, including a brother and sister from the video family. Students could also discuss issues among themselves in the Discuss the Issues section. Some students in a middle-class school in Addis Abbaba, the capital city of Ethiopia, joined in these discussions. Figure 1.4 shows some of the messages sent by the Ethiopian students, asking about life in New Zealand.

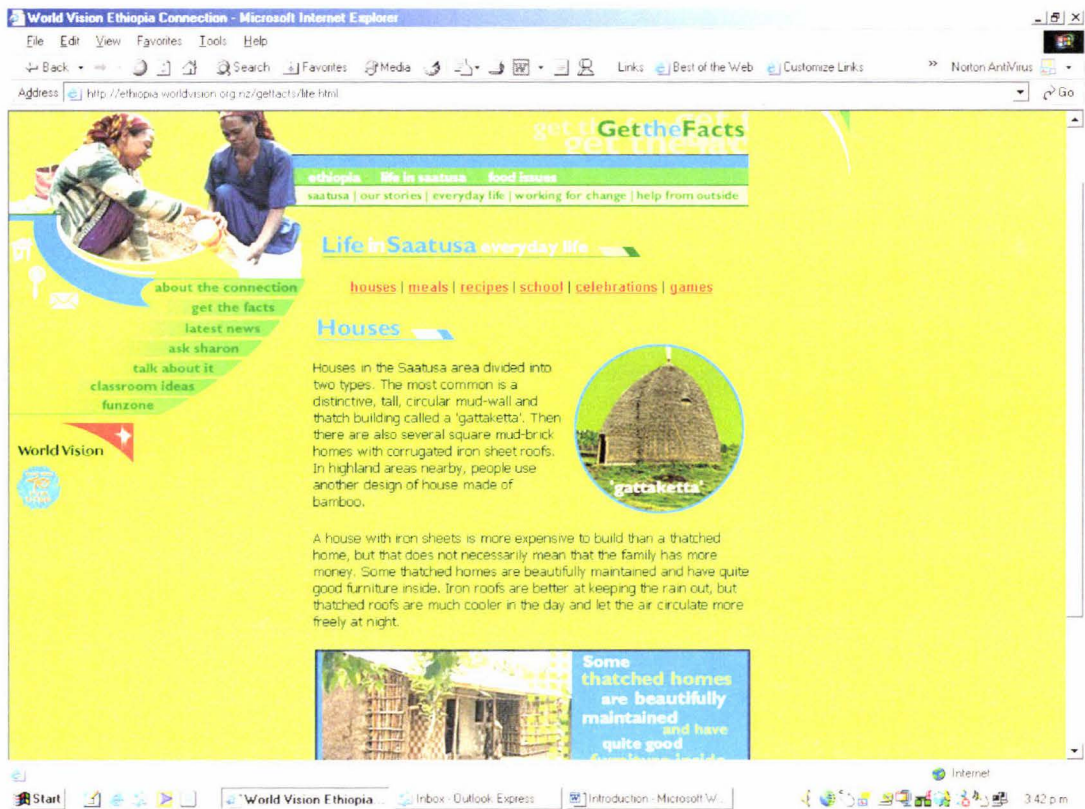


Figure 1.5 *Ethiopia Connection* sample Get the Facts page

1.2 What is a Virtual Field Trip?

Having described the *Ethiopia Connection*, it is helpful to put it into context among the various types of internet resources that are available for classroom use. Some of these resources are suited to an information metaphor. For example, a teacher may set students a task of researching a topic using the World Wide Web (Berson, 1996; Vanfossen, 2001). Students may find some of their information on websites designed specifically for educational use, but may also use websites set up by commercial, government or interest-based organisations. Other internet resources fit a communication metaphor. Riel and Fulton (2001) describe several different ways to use email to develop what they refer to as “learning communities”, in which students in different schools, cities or countries share ideas with each other, and/or with relevant experts. Communication technologies can also be used to allow students who are geographically separated to work together to complete a

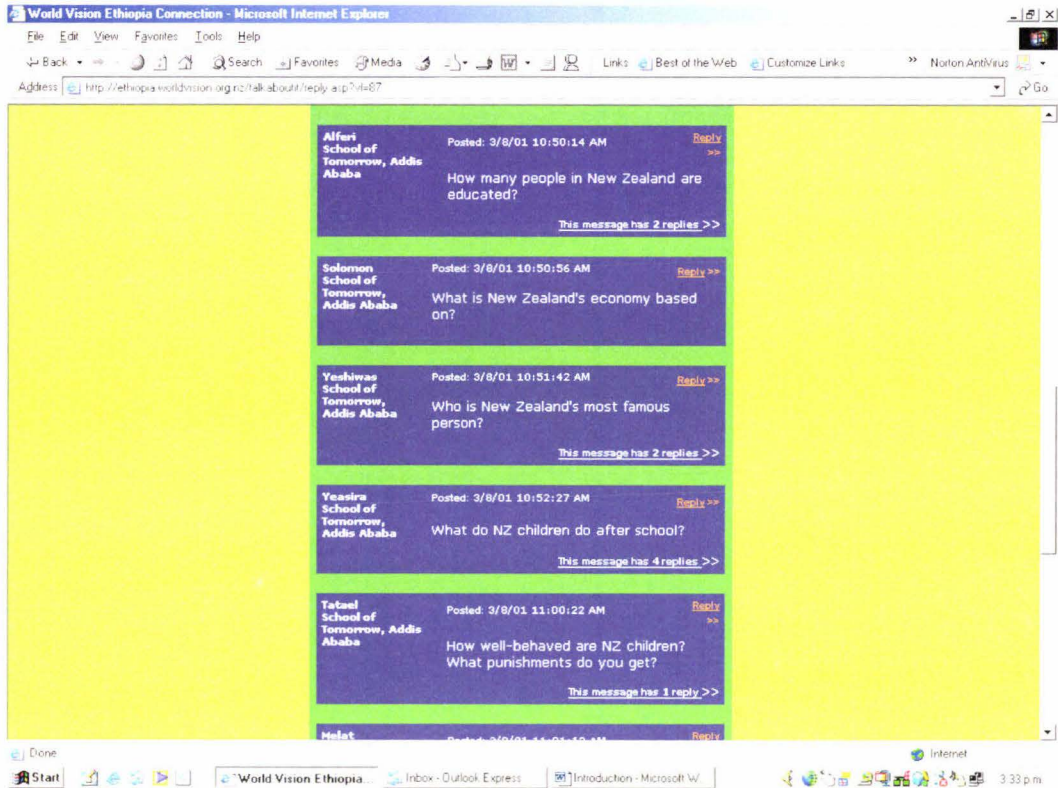


Figure 1.4 *Ethiopia Connection Discussion page*

As well as the communications sections, students could take part in a weekly site poll, solve photo puzzles, submit their best work or accounts of classroom activities to go on the website or learn about life in Ethiopia through an extensive Get the Facts section. A sample page from this section is shown in Figure 1.5.

joint project, such as a newspaper or even a concert (Moss, Amodeo, Bullock & Detjen, 1997).

Another major way of using the internet in classrooms involves the use of websites that have been specifically designed for the purpose. These web-based programmes are often referred to as “virtual field trips”, because they aim to approximate in electronic form the experiences and learning that students would have on a real field trip. The term “virtual field trip” has been used in two distinct ways – broadly, to cover any website giving information about a place, and more narrowly, to refer to an online project that allows students to follow a real journey or event as it happens.

The broader definition of a virtual field trip is widely used (see Bellan & Sherman, 1998; Cooper & Cooper, 1999; Rice & Wilson, 1999; Stainfield, Fisher, Ford & Solem, 2000). In this broad definition, a virtual field trip is any “opportunity to visit a place electronically for authentic learning experiences” (Nicholson, Fletcher & Hovell, 2001, p.3). Many websites included in this broad definition are museum sites, with photographs, maps, descriptions, video footage and other web-based resources that allow students to electronically access information available at the museum without the cost of travelling there. The narrower definition of a virtual field trip focuses on a real-time journey or event, which students can follow via the internet (Willis, 1999). These time-bound, journey-focused internet programmes are also referred to as virtual expeditions (Green, 2001), electronic appearances (Harris, 1998) or live broadcasts (Nicholson, Fletcher & Hovell, 2001). Essentially, students can “experience” a place by following the travels or work of a person who is physically there. During a specific time period, this person becomes the focus for learning, communicating with students via diary entries, photographs, maps and other resources posted on an ever-changing website. Often, this communication can be two-way, with students asking questions or holding discussions with the traveler. It is this narrower definition of a virtual field trip that best describes the *Ethiopia Connection*.