5-1-2006

World's Youth Connect through Global Nomads Group: An Interview with GNG's David Macquart

James L. Morrison

David Macquart

Follow this and additional works at: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/innovate

Part of the Education Commons

World's Youth Connect through Global Nomads Group: An Interview with GNG's David Macquart

All exhibits, tables and figures that have remained available have been included as additional content with their respective articles to be downloaded separately. Click here to return to the article page on NSUWorks and view the supplemental files.

Unfortunately, not all the supplemental files have survived until 2015 and some will be missing from the article pages. If you are an author in Innovate and would like to have your supplemental content included, please email the NSUWorks repository administrator at nsuworks@nova.edu.

World's Youth Connect through Global Nomads Group:
An Interview with GNG's David Macquart

by James L. Morrison and David Macquart

David Macquart is a 29-year-old activist who founded with several colleagues the Global Nomads Group in 1998. He was born in France and met his future partners while attending the American University of Paris during the late nineties.

I interviewed David at the 2005 National Educational Computing Conference (NECC) in Philadelphia.

James L. Morrison [JM]: David, what is the Global Nomads Group?

David Macquart [DM]: The Global Nomads Group (GNG) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to heightening children's understanding and appreciation of the world and its people. We moderate videoconferences between K-12 classes in different countries, organize virtual lectures, and conduct remote broadcasts from the world's historical and cultural sites. We bring young people together to meet across cultural and national boundaries, thereby providing them with opportunities to reflect upon their differences and similarities and to discuss the world issues that affect them.

JM: Why did you found GNG?

DM: It sounds like a cliché now, but the world has never been so interconnected. In the 21st century and beyond, cultural exchange and exposure at an early age is, and will be, crucial to enabling young people to live and interact in such an increasingly globalized world. However, as many recent reports have shown (Steinemann, Fiske, and Sackett 2001, 36) young Americans, in particular, seriously lack basic knowledge of other countries, other cultures, and international matters.

GNG aims to be a part of the solution by offering programs that deepen young peoples' understanding of other cultures and spark their interest in the world and its people. GNG programs offer students a tangible taste of places that they might never have the opportunity to visit on their own, bringing them that much closer to becoming informed and culturally aware citizens of the world.

JM: How did you get GNG started?

DM: Jonathan Giesen, Mark von Sponeck, Christopher Plutte, and I met for the first time as college students at the American University of Paris in the late nineties. We were young, ambitious, and idealistic students who gravitated toward one another because of the shared experience of traveling the globe at relatively young ages. We realized that we were fortunate to have had the opportunity to travel and learn about other cultures and ways of life. At the time, the world was changing quickly from a cultural, political, and business perspective. Global markets were expanding in unprecedented ways, meaning that before long, a truly international skill set would be required to compete effectively in the global workforce. And with technology shrinking the world every day, tolerance and respect for all cultures was growing ever more important.

We also knew that the opportunity to travel was not available to many young Americans, despite the fact that traveling the world provides the kind of perspective no student can ever learn from a book. Moreover, we believed that such a perspective was especially critical for students in the United States. The United States is such a large, isolated land mass, and many parts of the country are still relatively homogenous in their cultural environment. With these boundaries, American students need more than ever to gain an

understanding and respect for the different ways of thinking and doing things that exist throughout the world. That's why we founded the Global Nomads Group.

JM: How did you turn this vision into reality?

DM: The GNG mission has been the same from the beginning—to connect youth throughout the world virtually in order to open up dialogue and cultural exchange—but the medium for doing so wasn't always clear. We thought we would base our model on Internet technology, but the quality just wasn't there. That's when we met Jonathan Schlesinger, the president of Connexus International in Dallas, who introduced us to videoconferencing technology. Not only does videoconferencing technology provide the high-quality voice and video that webcamming can't, but it also doesn't inhibit the process. Participants don't have to worry about the technology; they can interact naturally and concentrate on what they're getting out of the program.

The first educational program GNG put together is a testament to the organization's ability to make do with very little. With no funding, we seized an opportunity to partner with a physician who was going to Honduras on a telemedicine assignment. We, the GNG team, took video footage of the doctor at work in Honduras and then facilitated a videoconference 10 days later between the doctor who had returned to the United States and the patients he'd seen in Honduras for a postoperative follow up. In exhange, the doctor paid for the cost of two round-trip tickets to Honduras, gave us access to a videoconferencing system, and loaned us a satellite connection to transmit the session overseas. We then used the system he loaned us for an additional project—a live broadcast from the Mayan ruins of Copan that we then transmitted to several high schools in Texas and Florida, allowing American students and Honduran students to share information about their respective cultures and communities.

Our first educational broadcast was a resounding success, and it opened the road to similar programs thereafter. For example, Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan learned about our programs after my colleague Mark von Sponeck sent him a letter congratulating him on an op-ed piece he had written. He invited us to visit his country and produce videoconferences between students in Amman and the United States; we were also able to produce videoconferencing sessions from more remote locations within the country. A videoconferencing equipment reseller in Dallas loaned us a Picturetel video system that we used to broadcast live from the Dead Sea and the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Petra. Shortly upon returning to the United States, we found out that Picturetel had been acquired by Polycom, who then went on to donate video equipment to us to continue our work.

JM: Describe your successes in connecting young people around the globe.

DM: GNG has connected thousands of youths in more than 25 countries and hundreds of thousands more through webcasts. For example, we organized broadcasts from the natural habitat of the mountain gorilla in Rwanda for our Rwanda Alive program; we discussed HIV and AIDS prevention with India, South Africa, and seven other countries for our CURRENTS program; and we explored the question of genocide with Sudanese refugees in Chad for our Sudan in Crisis program. These are just a few of the programs we've produced in the past few years, and each of them has given American students the opportunity to interact directly with others to learn more about the environmental, medical, and political issues pertaining to these diverse regions of the globe. But perhaps the most powerful project we have ever orchestrated was Project Voice, which connected U.S. students with students in Baghdad, both before the Iraq invasion and following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime. This project allowed U.S. and Iraqi teenagers the chance to talk before a looming invasion and after that invasion, an event that has changed their lives forever.

In addition, we've streamed hundreds of short clips—we call them webumentaries—from the countries we've explored, giving participants a feel for the distinctive cultures, communities, and customs in each of those locations. For institutions seeking additional resources for class projects, we have also created a series of full-length educational videos based on our past videoconferencing projects.

JM: How do you make the connections happen?

DM: GNG uses Polycom's [ViewStation FX](#) and [VSX 7000](#) videoconferencing systems to facilitate its cross-cultural exchanges. When we are operating outside of the United States, we use ISDN, IP, or satellites to broadcast; domestically, we use ISDN or IP connections, depending upon availability.

When GNG puts an educational videoconference program together that involves locations outside of the U.S., we work closely with the United Nations Development Programme ([UNDP](#)) to check out the existing infrastructure of the country and arrange the conference. The UNDP helps us determine what types of communications infrastructure and video equipment exist in the remote setting; it also helps us identify the most appropriate schools and classes for participation in that setting. If there is no videoconferencing equipment available in a country, we simply take the Polycom video systems with us.

JM: What is your vision for expanding global collaboration?

DM: Our vision is for GNG programming to be less of a special event and more of an everyday part of the learning process for students. That means institutionalizing our programs so that instructors and school administrators know that the incredible Rwanda program that their 12th graders experienced will also be offered the following year. Moreover, because most of the issues addressed in our programs continue to challenge governments and international institutions, sustaining these programs over time is all the more crucial in order to prevent them from becoming short-lived "sound bytes" rather than opportunities for promoting genuine awareness and understanding. In order to realize the educational potential of the GNG fully, we therefore hope to expand the frequency, continuity, and availability of our programs to all students who can benefit from them.

JM: What are the challenges you have faced and do you anticipate facing as you expand this project?

DM: The biggest problem we have is the following: How do you expand without compromising the quality of your programs? And how can you cut costs in order to involve more schools in your programs?

We are confident that we can address these challenges with the help of our supporters and partnering institutions. What started as a small endeavor operating on a shoestring budget has grown into a respected nonprofit organization funded and supported by highly regarded foundations in the United States such as the [Goldman Sachs Education Foundation](#) and the [Longview Foundation](#) as well as generous sponsors such as [Polycom](#), [Google](#), and [Glowpoint](#). The support from these institutions will help us keep costs down and avoid having to reinvent the wheel every year; they will also help us to build new programs from scratch and add them to our roster of available programs the following year.

JM: Are there any recent or upcoming programs that may be of particular interest to educators?

DM: Just recently (in mid-February 2006), we organized [The PULSE](#), a national discussion on Islam and what some people are calling "the clash between Islam and the West." The program revolved mostly around the recent Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad, and it required that participants reflect on everything from the representation of Islam in the media to the concept of free speech. We followed up with a question-and-answer session featuring Ahmed Younis from the Muslim Public Affairs Council, who answered students' questions about Islam and dispelled myths about the religion in the process. Overall, it was a great success and involved nearly 20 schools spread out across the United States.

Right now we are moving full steam ahead with [Mozambique Alive](#), a videoconferencing journey through Mozambique and its history, starting on March 23rd of this year and continuing through much of April. We expect a large response for this unique program and have planned nine interactive broadcasts on subjects ranging from cultural exchanges to discussions with former child soldiers. It's bound to be exciting!

JM: I am impressed by the initiative you and your team have shown in addressing an important problem. I know that our readers share your appreciation of Polycom for providing the technical equipment and support that enables you to provide this service to people around the world. We will be following your progress through your [Web site](#).

References:

Steinemann, N. K., E. B. Fiske, and V. Sackett. 2001. *Asia in the schools: Preparing young Americans for today's interconnected world.* New York: Asia Society.