# Start With Cats!
## Innovative Virtual Opportunities
## that Bring the Community into the Classroom

*by Jennifer McKenzie*
*K–12 District Teacher Librarian,*
*Siuslaw School District 97J*
*jmckenzie@siuslaw.k12.or.us*

JENNIFER MCKENZIE (she/her) is a 20-year veteran English Language Arts teacher and teacher librarian, a former US Army Medical Service Corps Officer, a Fulbright Teachers for Global Classrooms scholar, a Future Ready Librarian presenter and podcaster, a five-time Teacher of the Year recipient, the 2019 Oregon Teacher Librarian of the Year, and the Region 3 Executive Board member of the Oregon Association of School Libraries. She is currently the K–12 District Teacher Librarian for Siuslaw School District in Florence, Oregon. "Innovation" is her favorite word! She regularly provides service learning opportunities that amplify library literacy standards via live or prerecorded virtual field trips that bring both local and global expertise to her Siuslaw learning community.

Oregon school systems canceled face-to-face classes as our state went into shelter-in-place on Friday, March 13, 2020. In the blink of an eye, educators had to negotiate reaching our learning communities digitally whilst navigating a global pandemic and collective trauma. We had to strategically figure out how to "ride the wave" during a period of accelerated change throughout our global educational landscape.

School library staff—the creative, innovative, and magical unicorns that we are—began offering live online classes and programming to include read-alouds, virtual poetry and music offerings, virtual gaming meetups, and virtual safe spaces. Among the many innovative community builders and silver linings that emerged from this pandemic were live and recorded virtual field trips and programming as well as the ability to harness the power of global professional connections.

### Global Educational Networks and Fulbright Scholarship: Connect and Collaborate!

If you weren't a global library collaborator before the pandemic, particularly through social media, I'm guessing you've become one by now. Another silver lining of the pandemic has been reaching out and working with diverse school library staff—any time, any place. I first met Amy Page (District Librarian, Eugene, OR) at the Oregon Association of School Libraries (OASL) 2019 Fall Conference where we were both panelists discussing library operations amid COVID-19. We loved each other's energy and started pulling together a professional learning community (PLC) within our region.

A month later, I met Michelle Carton (Elementary Librarian, Anchorage, AK) at one of the Future Ready Librarian Summits hosted by Shannon McClintock Miller (District

Teacher Librarian and Director of Innovation, Van Meter, IA). We were presenting research and teaching strategies concerning virtual programming and virtual field trips. Our districts partnered later during the spring of 2021 to explore the gray whale migration along the west coast. Michelle encouraged me to apply for a Fulbright Teachers for Global Classrooms (TGC) Fellowship, which I received!

The Fulbright Program is an international educational research network sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State (see Figure 1). The United Nations (2021) strategically created 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which are an urgent call for action by all countries, developed and developing, in global partnership. Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education (SDG Goal 4) is crucial in spurring global social justice and economic growth for all. Our 2021 international Fulbright TGC cohort consists of 401 educator researchers who, in one year's time, will impact over 75,681 students.
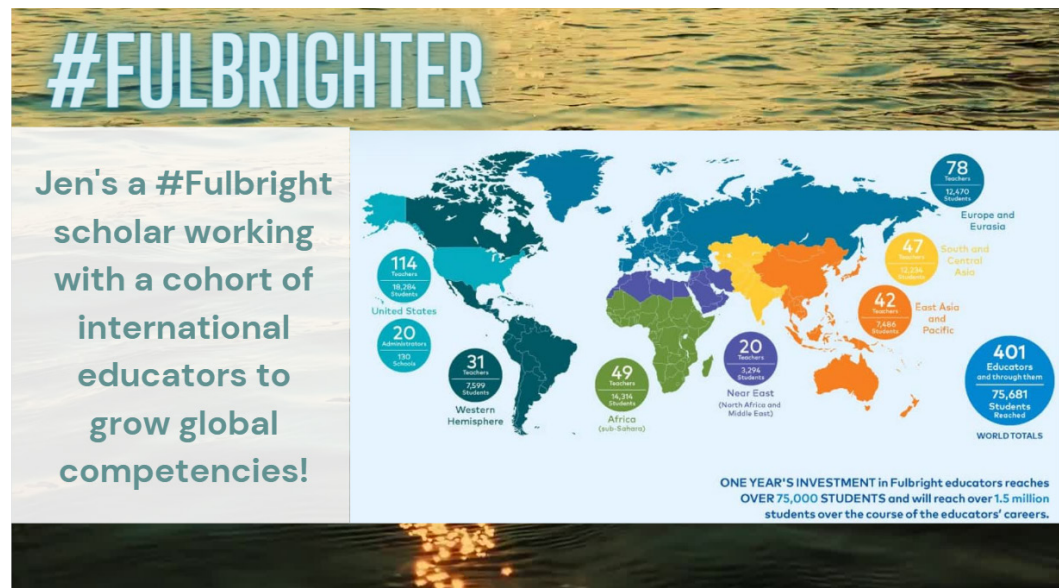


Figure 1: This map shows the one-year impact of the 2021 cohort of the Fulbright Teacher Program for Global Classrooms.

Much of our global collaboration is possible by leveraging technology tools to conduct virtual field trips and programming opportunities (see Figure 2). Our work is grounded in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals with a focus on "glocal" (local/global) teaching strategies. As my international educational network expanded, I met Tracey Rowley (Tech Integration Specialist, Tucson, AZ) and Michelle Singh (LCT-E Learning Solutions CEO, Miami, FL) via online conferences concerning virtual teaching strategies. The three of us recently copresented a virtual field trip session at International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) Live 22.

Figure 2: Global virtual field trips allow collaboration with partnering learning communities.

### Siuslaw School District Community Connections

When I first arrived as the new K–12 District Teacher Librarian in the fall of 2020 (in a district that had lacked that position for well over 20 years), I could see what operational and curricular gaps existed. I could see what people needed, but I began to ask what they wanted. The number one response was connections: connections with Florence, with the district as a whole, with each other, and with the outside world.

In response, using a cell phone and a selfie stick, we initiated local virtual field trips. Since then, we've conducted hundreds of weekly trips. We've been building curricular connections and driving business to local shops and organizations. Our trips and service learning projects have assisted in animals being adopted from the Oregon Coast Humane Society, and we've collaborated globally with other schools outside of our learning community.

### K–12 and Professional Development Library Programming

The local virtual field trips we're conducting are fabulous library programming opportunities for our learning communities, and so much more. We're covering all our library priority standards, and we're also teaching our learning community what 21st-century library curriculum is all about. We're co-creating our tours and interviews as primary texts, archiving them in our Destiny digital catalog and creating new research collections (Destiny Collections), and highlighting articles from the Gale Databases each week. Students and staff are demonstrating how to be good digital citizens, and our community partners and local city government folks now are using and reinforcing the language of digital leadership.

### Digital Leadership plus Service Learning

Our Siuslaw virtual field trips have become meaningful service learning opportunities. The service learning projects I've worked on have always been the most meaningful, impactful, and magical moments in my career. Authentic service learning projects connect students who have curricular skills to learn with a partnering organization that has a need. As a former English

Language Arts teacher, this was always reading, writing, and speaking skills. It's a win-win situation in which students are learning or writing "for real" whilst serving a community gap.

For example, I lived in a community that experienced a massive 100-year flood that shut down the town; staff and students were out on the sandbag line for weeks. When it was safe to return to school, my middle school students partnered with the city government to research and write flood preparedness pamphlets that were distributed to the community.

I've also worked extensively with veteran and new American oral histories in which we conducted interviews and archived them through the Library of Congress. Students also created and presented documentaries of their journey to community crowds of 500+ to further promote the benefits of service learning.

### Logistics for Live Local Virtual Field Trips

So, we can see the power of local and global virtual field trips and community partnerships. Now what? How do you get started? There is a plethora of resources available to conduct global field trips, like Flipgrid Virtual Field Trip events and scheduled trips offered through the California Parks Online Resources for Teachers and Students (PORTS) system. My favorite trips have emphasized local, live, "cell phone and a selfie-stick" trips for my learning community.

- **Start With Cats:** If it's your first time conducting a live virtual field trip, the easiest organization to get acquainted with is your local Humane Society. Students, particularly our younger friends, are incredibly engaged with anything animal or nature-centric. You can simply begin weekly read-alouds from your local shelter or "catio," and you'll provide rich content for your learning community. Along the way, you'll help promote a local organization's mission and get some kitties and puppies adopted! I have a standing agreement with our local Oregon Coast Humane Society, and I pop in frequently for read-alouds, to conduct tours, and to coordinate service learning opportunities for Siuslaw and the shelter (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: We conduct virtual field trips and community service learning projects with the Oregon Coast Humane Society.

- **Live Trips:** We are onsite with our students and community partners live each week using Google Meet. We are particularly Wi-Fi-challenged on the coast, so occasionally I must prerecord site footage. For example, we did a trip to the water treatment plant. All the reservoirs and equipment are out in a field with no Wi-Fi, so I recorded a 15-minute tour of the plant in advance. Even with prerecorded footage, we still go live onsite and introduce our community partners. One of our library assistants controls our Google Meet on the back end and plays the footage for me. Afterward, we cut back to live coverage to continue Q&A and interaction with the organization.

- **Staffing—Play the Long Game:** Whatever you plan, make it sustainable considering your regular staffing and timing. You'll need a Google Meet (or Zoom) buddy. Someone has to open and control your digital platform while you're onsite live out in the community. Also, think of your timing. I can easily pop across town, do a live trip, and be back all within the average 60-minute class period.

- **Technology:** My advice is to keep your technology super simple. Really, all you need is your cell phone and a selfie stick. I've tried several other options, including a Chromebook plus mobile hotspot and I learned the cell phone/selfie stick combo is just easier. I have better Wi-Fi reception and it produces better video and streaming quality. As outdoor adventures are some of our biggest draws, and because we do all our trips rain or shine, rain gear is an absolute must out on the coast. See the sidebar for the Padlet of resources, including Amazon links to the specific technology we've used.

- **Advertising and Social Media:** Garner your audience! Our trips are designed for a K–12 audience plus staff and community members. We advertise trips in our monthly *Smore* newsletter, in our weekly K–12 curricular slides, on our school district website, and via all social media platforms (currently Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok). When I post to social media, I tag our partnering organization, which provides rich content and promotion for all involved. Teachers also post information to their Google Classroom sites. Siuslaw is not currently using Canvas, but you could push out content with ease via that learning management system. Eugene and Siuslaw school districts collaborated for our ocean adventures trip with Marine Biologist (and whale whisperer) Carrie Newell in Depoe Bay, OR. We used Zoom and kicked out a YouTube live stream. We had hundreds of participants watching from across the country. Just imagine the possibilities, friends!

- **Curate Research Collections:** We began curating Destiny Collections for each trip that include the live Google Meet, recorded virtual field trip, and/or prerecorded tours. With this, we're co-creating and archiving primary texts. Students can search for our virtual trip content and use it for their research writing. We're also adding the recorded weekly read-aloud, related fiction and nonfiction titles from our school district libraries, and any other applicable websites or resources.

## Conclusion

With today's generation of students, finding new ways to connect learning in the classroom with the outside community, making it relevant, providing diverse experiences, and furnishing new ways to provide social-emotional learning can be a challenge. Harnessing the power of technology and virtual field trips is one innovative solution to create authentic, meaningful connections both locally and globally. The best way to start is with cats! Reading a book with a student's grandma and her cat, visiting the local shelter to visit the adoptable cats and learn about pet care, or talking with another class across the world using Flipgrid about pets, are all easy options that can be easily implemented with very little work but have positive outcomes.

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### Resources

The following are resources for local and global virtual field trips. Reach out if you'd like to collaborate and connect.

"Virtual Field Trips: A Service Learning Opportunity"
Padlet: https://padlet.com/jmckenzie39/p6ook4uejgf54649

Follow these innovative educators and organizations via Twitter:
- Jen McKenzie: @jenmarymckenzie
- Amy Page: @AmyPageTL
- Shannon McClintock Miller: @shannonmmiller
- Michelle Carton: @AKGlobalTeacher
- Tracey Rowley: @TraceyRowley2
- Michelle Singh: @SinghNBCT
- Fulbright Teacher Exchanges: @FulbrightTeach
- ISTE: @ISTE

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## Supporting Research

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