

INTERNATIONAL LINKS

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AS THE Training and Development Agency for Schools' adverts regularly remind us, teaching is a profession that allows talented people to connect with the younger generation, using their skills to draw out the latent abilities that will underpin students' ongoing life choices.

However, as anyone who has spent time in the classroom knows, the reality of delivering inspiring, curriculum-relevant classes day-in, day-out, can be quite a challenge.

Rafi.ki – which means "friend" in Kiswahili – is an online global community for schools that makes this goal easier to achieve. Teachers are supported through structured, cross-curricular projects, covering a diverse range of topical issues such as citizenship, Human Rights, climate change, and conflict prevention, which come complete with lesson plans, expansion activities and additional resources.

Rafi.ki allows teachers to partner with overseas schools on various activities, while many use the staff forum to share experiences and discuss issues with peers.

The main aim behind Rafi.ki is to improve attainment and bridge national, religious and social divides, and the community is already home to members from over 1,000 schools in 100 countries.

All online communities become more vibrant and stimulating as the membership base grows, and for this reason silver membership is free to all. At this level, schools can create their own profile page, find international partners, swap lesson plans, undertake a selection of projects and utilise all the teacher-led communication tools including audio and video-conferencing.

Rafi.ki is a not-for-profit initiative so, although gold membership does incur a fee for UK schools, the proceeds are used to fund similar access for those in the developing world, increasing diversity and creating a more fulfilling learning environment.

Among other benefits, this enhanced level allows pupils to create individual profile pages and talk to children across the world in a less formal manner. In today's climate of concern over the dangers posed by young people's online conversations, Rafi.ki presents an opportunity for this age group to enjoy social networking in a safe and fully-moderated environment.

Of course, all of this is only interesting if the technology is actually having a positive effect on the learning experience – for both teachers and students – and research shows that this is certainly the case.

A survey conducted at the end of the last academic year showed that Rafi.ki helps teachers to gain the attention of even the most disengaged pupils, with 96 per cent saying that the community enhances motivation amongst this group. At the same time, 80 per cent feel that involvement in Rafi.ki is having a positive impact on young people's self-confidence.

From the students' perspective, the community

is stimulating cross-cultural exchanges and greater global awareness. More than half of the respondents to the survey have contacted pupils in two to five other countries. When asked how Rafi.ki is helping to develop their skills, more than 70 per cent felt that their understanding of global citizenship has improved.

At least 84 per cent feel it has had a positive impact on their ICT knowledge. Rafi.ki is also enhancing awareness concerning potential employment and career choices, with 62 per cent of students saying that their thinking about such matters is being positively influenced.



Connecting schools

Making links: Pupils from King John School in Essex can now interact with students from schools in around 100 countries

Hina Robinson, humanities teacher at the King John School in Essex, believes that the opportunity to be part of the Rafi.ki online learning community is too good to miss.

She explained: "Pupils here live a sheltered life and pay little attention to world news. Rafi.ki gives students the opportunity to see other people's perspectives on life and the difficult situations they have to survive. I want to turn our young people into global citizens and open their minds to the wide range of situations around the world."

Lawrence Sheriff School in Rugby recently undertook a project through Rafi.ki, in conjunction with Plan International, which addressed the problem of modern day slavery.

One of the students involved in that project was deeply touched by the experience.

They said: "If I'd read about this in a book I'd have thought that's just history and nothing to do with me. If I'd read about it in the newspaper as happening now, I'd think that they had made it up to sell more papers. Either way I would forget about it quickly."

Rafi.ki is a not-for-profit online community designed just for schools. It uses simple to use technology funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, the Department for International Development, and the Esther Fairbairn Foundation, enabling schools to work with each other simply and effectively across the world.

Rafi.ki provides a series of structured, cross-curricular projects that cover areas such as slavery, climate change, conflict prevention, recycling, modern foreign languages, and creative writing.

Gemini, the charity behind Rafi.ki, has structured the community to provide support and allow for the sharing of ideas and experiences. Schools are encouraged to find a partner in another country and work through projects together, providing a truly international dimension to all activity. The system contains a built-in communications centre with varying elements that can be selected depending on the needs of the school.

Schools wishing to see Rafi.ki in action can meet the team at the BETT Show, which runs in London from January 14 to 17. Schools that sign up to silver membership at the show will be entered into a free prize draw to win annual gold membership. Visitors can also witness a video-conference between a partnered UK and overseas school, during which students and teachers will discuss a range of topical issues.

"Using Rafi.ki we had the chance to find out if other people around the world had any views on slavery or had been affected by it. It was like a huge conference. Now I know that it's true and that together people around the world must stop it. I won't forget that."

• Henry Warren is the CEO of Rafi.ki. Visit www.rafi.ki

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