

Where in the World Are They? Students Find Out with Mystery Skype

It is time for my students to guess where the class they are meeting for the first time via Skype is located.

“Is it North Carolina?”

There is silence in the classroom as my fifth graders crane their necks toward the screen.

“No!” shouts the voice from the computer speakers, and my students scramble back together. A buzz of “What could it be then?” envelops them.

This is what it sounds like when 23 students engage in what is known as Mystery Skype. The idea is incredibly simple, but the unfolding of the idea can be downright magical. When else can you see students using all of their background knowledge, tech savvy, and common sense just to figure out where someone is in the world?

I first learned of Mystery Skype when I saw it being discussed on Twitter. I was lucky enough to be included in a group run by Caren MacConnell, a New Jersey teacher and technology coach. I fell in love with just how much content this idea covers, and yet it requires very little work. And because it unfolds like a scavenger hunt, it’s easy to lure my students in.

The concept is simple:

- Connect with another classroom. Just Google Mystery Skype and you’ll find plenty of eager participants.
- Pick a date and a time.
- Get your webcam and microphone ready. Don’t forget to do a test call to make sure your technology is working. If Skype is blocked at your school, try using Google Hangout instead.
- Explain the game to your students by saying something like: “We are on a mission. We have to find out where this mystery class is calling us from. It can be from anywhere in the world, but we can only ask yes or no questions. They, in turn, are trying to figure out where we are.”
- Finally, delegate specific roles to students before the call.

Assigning roles or jobs during the call is vital because it spreads out the responsibility and gives all students a sense of involvement and purpose. As you do more of these calls, the jobs will rotate and students will learn how to do it, which will make everything run more smoothly. Here’s our list of jobs, but don’t be afraid to get creative and come up with your own:

Greeters. They say hello to the other class and offer some cool facts about their own class without giving away the location.

Inquirers. They ask the questions and are the voice of the classroom.

Answerers. They answer the questions. These students need to know their state facts and geography pretty well.

Think tanks. They sit in a group and figure out the clues based on the information. Our \$2 whiteboards came in handy for this.

Question keepers. They typed all of the questions and answers for us to review later.

Google mappers. They use Google Maps to study the geography and piece together clues.

Atlas mappers. They use atlases and our pull-down map to decipher clues.

Clue keepers. They work closely with answerers and inquirers to help guide them in their questioning.

Runner. This student runs from group to group relaying information.

Photographer. This student takes pictures during the call.

Videographers. They film the event.

Clue markers. They work with puzzles of the United States to remove any states that were eliminated by the clues.

Problem solver. They help students with any issues that they may encounter during the call.

Closers. They end the call in a nice manner.

It’s important to prepare the students at least a few days in advance so they can gather materials, such as maps and atlases, or ask questions about their responsibilities.

During the call, teachers have to do something that may not come naturally: Stand back and let the students do their jobs, communicate, and work as a team. Teamwork is going to get them to the right questions. Experience helps with this as well.

Encourage students to collaborate before guessing, and set ground rules for how quickly they can guess the state

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Social Studies



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so it does not degenerate into “Is it this state?” over and over. Watch them hone their geography skills as they use landmarks, weather information, and cardinal directions to figure it out.

Watch the excitement build as they eliminate states or countries and crescendo as they make their guess. Help them get back on track if needed, particularly if their guess was incorrect.

Keep going until both classrooms have figured it out, and then be ready to ask other questions to get to know each other.

Once the call is complete, give students time to reflect on what worked and what needs to be reworked. Again, step back and let them discuss. You can offer gentle suggestions, but the students should make the ultimate decisions.

And, finally, wait for that moment when that one child looks at you and asks, “When can we do it again?”

Geography taught, history covered, global collaboration created, communication skills honed, all in one Skype call.

—Pernille Ripp is a fifth grade teacher at West Middleton Elementary School in Middleton, Wisconsin, USA. She is passionate about helping students find their voices. Read her blog at www.mrsripp.blogspot.com.