

## **Product Review on**

***KidSpace: A Place for Kids to Publish and Share***  
**Kidlink's New Online Interface for Global Projects**

**Created by Bonnie Thurber and Robert Davis**

Northwestern University  
Chicago, Illinois

Reviewed by

Barbara Schulz for

## ***Introduction***

Kidlink is an Online Learning Environment for K-12 students, which allows students and teachers to share their work with a global audience. It encourages them to view and discuss the work of their peers around the world, while learning about other cultures first hand. The environment has evolved over a ten-year period with the aid of volunteer educators who build an incredible online presence with the students.

Kidlink projects are translated into twenty-one different languages, and include several modes of sharing. Web pages have been the previous primary way of sharing student work, and showcasing the projects. In the past, the environment has included an IRC chat function, the use of many listservs, a MOO, as well as basic email exchanges. While all of these still exist, and have been fine tuned over the years, a new interchange platform has been created called ***KidSpace***.

The ***KidSpace*** environment was developed to make the process of uploading files to the internet easier on teachers and students, thus making online project sharing more user friendly, and promote a sense of an online community. As a result, the online clientele has constantly grown, and the projects have become more extensive, while having a solid base because they follow learning standards.

This article will review ***KidSpace*** as a user tool for online communication, as well as a total online global learning environment.

## ***Rationale of Kidlink as an Online Learning Environment***

With the global climate at the beginning of the new millennium, the need for a “globally literate citizenry” (Smith, 2002) has prompted the development of a parallel global curriculum. As stated by Merryfield (2002), “Global educators make instructional decisions that profoundly influence students’ understanding of other cultures and global issues.” (Merryfield, 2002) Due to the tragic events of September 11, 2001, educators have become more aware of the need for global understanding.

The connectivity limitations and challenges in the K-12 schools, coupled with the fact that designing and planning an online presence is usually “.. more extensive and time consuming” (Anderson, 2002) makes global communication prohibitive to many educators. According to Leggett and Persichite (1998) as well as Muilenberg and Berge (2001) the five barriers of time, access, resources, expertise, and support inhibit the use of technology in the K-12 classroom. Compounded by the usual schedule of K-12 educational environments, and the curriculum required by most school districts, the development of online environments for K-12 has taken a grass roots approach. The visage of online environments at the K-12 level has the facade of projects or modules versus the whole course venue taken by higher education and business. This allows the individual educator, as well as home schooled youngsters and others, to utilize the environment without it becoming as time consuming and tedious as an online course. It

gives the students small amounts of exposure to their online peers in time monitored increments, which suit their developmental level.

Developing an online environment was not a priority in most school districts until the September 11, 2001 tragedy. The shock of that day, and the subsequent awareness of the seeds of terrorism in our global society, have made educators aware that students need to develop tolerance at an early age, and to continue to learn about other cultures and their interpret issues that have global reach.

The grass roots efforts of online learning for K-12 has been developing since 1990. Organizations such as I\*Earn (2002), Kidlink and Global Schoolhouse (2002), have evolved as the need and interest arose. Over the last dozen years, these organizations have been developing from the grass roots efforts into full-fledged curriculum products that meet local, state, and federal standards. Some of those grassroots organizations are still going strong, and promoting a sense of online community to students at very young ages.

According to Harasim, Teles, & Turoff (1995), “Learning networks are groups of people who use the Internet and Web to communicate and collaborate in order to build and share knowledge... they could also occur at the grade school level.” (Hiltz & Turoff, 2002) Kidlink’s byline is “Empowering youth to build global networks of friends”(Kidlink, 2002) therefore, making it a viable online learning network.

### ***History of Kidlink™***

The founders of Kidlink, Odd de Presno and Anne-Tove Vestfossen began the program during 1990 in Norway as an online event during Children’s Cultural Week. The purpose at that time was to plan a “channel for kids” (Presno, 2001), and “Young Talk” was born. In April of the same year, Nancy Stefanik, from SciNet in Canada, joined the movement. The activity was moved to SciNet’s server and renamed **Norlink**. In fourteen days, 260 children from New Foundland, USA, and Canada joined the talk project.

Norlink gained so much attention at the Electronic Networking Association Conference in May 1990, that it “prompted the birth to Kidlink.” (Presno, 2001). Since then, it has moved operations to North Dakota State University, and has hundreds of sponsors from around the world (Presno, 2001). Over the last ten years, Kidlink’s online activities have been translated into twenty-one different languages. It has been written about in a variety of international magazines, as well as presented in conferences around the world.

### ***KidSpace as An Online Environment***

Until recently, participation in Kidlink primarily consisted of communications shared in several ways: multiple listservs, email, a chat environment called *IRCChat*, and its more formal format *KidForum*, a discussion forum (*KidCafe*), KIDPROJ (a more structured project oriented environment for classes), and *KidArt* (a place to share drawings). All of

these facets of the environment promoted “Building Bridges” across cultures (Kidlink 2000).

A common place to share student work was needed. Many projects involved students’ creating work about guided topics. Many of these projects involved images, sound, and text. The projects needed to be shared in an environment, which enabled teachers and students to upload such work to the internet with an easy interface. In addition, the environment needed to be translated easily into the many languages that Kidlink participants used as their primary language. Since the work being done involved minors, the environment needed to be a protected one. At Northwestern University, two Kidlink volunteers, Bonnie Thurber and Robert Davis, worked on creating an environment that would enable all of the above conditions.

In April 2001, they began beta testing the new environment, which they called *KidSpace*. The environment was developed using a RedHat internet server, Apache, ColdFusion, and MySQL. *KidSpace* was launched officially in September 2001. Since then, it has received the Tech Award from Santa Clara University in California, and is in competition for two other awards.

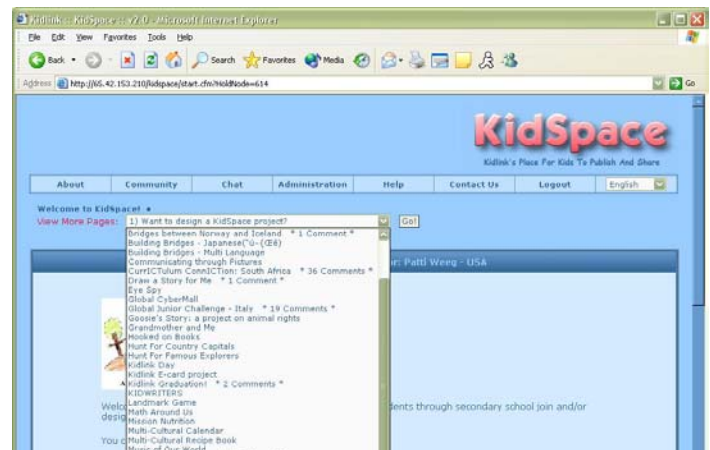
### What Exactly is KidSpace??

When a web surfer opens up to KidSpace at <http://www.kidlink.org/kidspace> they see a page similar to hundreds of other web pages for education. The links on this page lead to projects in different languages.

To reach the English version, a user needs to click on the **KIDPROJ-MULTI** link.

On any of the links you will see children’s work posted, along with directions in the appropriate language, and comments from other viewers.

As one progresses through the students’ entries, there are directions asking the surfer to add a comment to the page. One can view what others have said about the student’s work, or ask them questions about it, or give them feedback on the work posted.



**Figure 1 Opening a Project in KidSpace - Captured from <http://65.42.153.210/kidspace/start.cfm?HoldNode=615&HoldNav=614> on 02/28/03**



If a user chooses to post a comment by clicking on **Add Comments**, they will be prompted for a user name and password. (See below for procedures for obtaining a password). Once logged in, a separate window opens in which the comment can be typed. When **Attach** is

clicked, the comment seems to disappear. In reality, it has gone to the project moderator's email box, to be approved and made active. So the commenter will need to check back at a later date to see their comments added. This is another of the steps taken to ensure that the projects are positive experiences for the youth who created the materials.

### Entering student work...

Participating in any of the projects has become a less complicated procedure since KidSpace has been utilized. The organization is run by volunteers who are primarily teachers who want to be sure that the environment is safe for youngsters. When someone wants to join a project, directions are usually given in the introduction giving directions. In most cases, the students have to fill out a form answering "4Q's" on the "Response" page located at <http://www.kidlink.org.response>. The students are advised to write the answers to the questions in their own classrooms, then submit the answers using the online form. Once the form is completed, received and evaluated by the moderators, the child is given a password and login to access the project.

In the meantime, the teacher of the students needs to contact the project moderator, and have a space created on KidSpace under the project space for their students to post their work. The teacher is subscribed to the KidSpace Coordinators listserv at the same time. This listserv is where the logistics of the project is discussed, and any communication between teachers takes place.

Once the class, students, and teacher are signed up, a lesson plan is usually included somewhere in the project pages, which guides the teacher through the lesson. When student work is ready to be posted, a teacher

- clicks on the ***Student Work*** link in the project,
- navigates to their assigned space,
- clicks on ***New Page*** to add a page for each child, or one page for all the students.

Students can then type into the box, or copy and paste their work from a previously made word processing document.

Adding a picture is just as simple as long as it is a digital picture from either a camera, scanner or is computer generated. The user

clicks on the ***Add Picture*** link, and receives a dialog box, which guides them through using the ***Browse*** button to find the picture on their computer. Clicking on the ***send picture*** button places the picture on the page. Only one picture is allowed per page.



**Figure 3 Adding a child's work** - (Captured from <http://65.42.153.210/kidspace/start.cfm?HoldNode=615&HoldNav=614> on February 28, 2003)

At the present time, the ability to add sound and movies to KidSpace is limited. If a teacher stores the movie or sound on their own website, and points to it within a project, it can be seen there. However, that means the teacher needs the knowledge of how to upload a movie or sound file to the web.

### **Concluding Remarks**

With its ease of use for teachers and students, and its curriculum and standards based projects, *KidSpace* is a versatile online learning environment for K-12 students, teachers and classrooms. It has many features which enable web wary teachers to perform tasks beyond their abilities such as posting student work to the web.

*KidSpace* needs to push the interactive nature of the environment to achieve its maximum potential. While it has a powerful tool with its *Add Comments* capability, most comments at this time are more of a pat on the back for students, than a two-way communication tool. For some projects, the two-way communication has taken place on the listservs and through email, but the same give and take between students is not evident in the KidSpace environment as yet. There are other functions such as links to *Communities* and *Chat*, which seem to be underutilized. The environment's video and audio capabilities need to be enhanced to meet future demands.

Even with these limitations, *KidSpace* currently meets the needs of most classroom teachers, and with the focus on global projects and the need for a "global curriculum"(Smith, 2002), *KidSpace* may become one of the most widely used tools in the classroom.

### **References:**

Bacon, Nancy A., & Kischner, Gerritt. (2002). Shaping Global Classrooms. *Educational Leadership*, 60, 48-51.

Global SchoolNet Foundation (2002). *Communicate, Collaborate, & Celebrate Learning!*. Retrieved October 19, 2002 from <http://www.globalschoolnet.org/index.html> .

Harasim, L., Hiltz, S.R., Teles, L., and Turoff, M. (1995). *Learning Networks: A Field Guide to Teaching and Learning Online*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Hiltz, Starr R. & Turoff, Murray. (2002). What Makes Learning Networks Effective? *Communications of the ACM*, 45 no. 4, 56-59.

International Education and Resource Network (2002). *Connecting Youth Making a Difference in the World*. Retrieved October 19, 2002 from <http://www.learns.org/> .

Kidlink(2000). *Building Bridges*. Retrieved October 13, 2002 from

<http://65.43.153.210/kidspace/start.cfm?HoldNode=493>.

Kidlink (2001). *KidSpace – A Place for Kids to Publish and Share*. Retrieved October 13, 2002 from <http://www.kidlink.org/kidspace> .

Presno, Odd de. (2001).. “*Young Talk*” and *Norlink*. Retrieved October 6, 2002 from <http://www.kidlink.org/history/1990/norlink.html>.

Presno, Odd de(2001). *Kidlink Sponsors*. Retrieved October 6, 2002 from <http://www.kidlink.org/finance/sponsors.html#MAINSAP-G>.

Merryfield, Merry M. (2002). The Difference a Global Educator Can Make. *Educational Leadership*, 60, 18-21.

Smith, Andrew F. (2002). How Global is the Curriculum?. *Educational Leadership*, 60, 38 – 41.