

BrainPOP Supports a New Educational Model and Demonstrates the Power of Educational Technology in a Rural School in Haiti

Students at L'Ecole de Choix in Mirebalais, Haiti, come from homes of extreme poverty where daily life is difficult. They may sleep on the floor of a one-room hut of mud, straw, or concrete bricks, without plumbing or electricity. Most of their parents are farmers. Some of the students have important responsibilities at home such as cooking, cleaning, getting water, feeding pigs, chickens or goats, and taking care of their siblings. Many have never been to school before. Most rural Haitian schools are desperate for basic resources including electricity, textbooks,



and certified teachers. Traditional instruction is comprised of repetition and memorization. A typical teacher in rural Haiti does not use technology in the classroom, and many have never used a computer themselves, so elementary students have little chance of achieving technology literacy.



But L'Ecole de Choix, or "The School of Choice," is quite different from Haiti's other rural schools and is a change from the education status quo. Choix was built in 2010-2011 with the support of Zynga.org, Intel®, and other international partners, hoping to create a new learning model in Haiti's post-earthquake era. With trilingual curriculum in French, English, and Creole plus its student-centered leadership and communication-oriented educational techniques, the school is designed to be a country-wide model of 21st century learning. The teaching staff is highly trained, and first-rate technology resources, including BrainPOP®, support learning objectives while keeping students very much engaged.

The Choix learning environment is based on the learning philosophy of John Dewey, who believed that children attend school to become active participants in their own learning and also to become active in their communities. Choix prepares students to be future leaders of Haiti with a "learn

by doing" approach. As one advisor said, "They need real, guided experiences to foster their capacity to contribute to society, to ensure effective and accountable communications, and to emerge as leaders responsible in the future for the impact of education."

Choix's principal, Mary Clisbee, holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership, and has a deep understanding of what it takes to provide a 21st century education that meets the needs of her students. Dr. Clisbee – in consultation with lead teachers and the chair of the school board – worked with Choix's international partners to identify learning materials and content to ensure that their academic program would be relevant and integrated.

"We were seeking academic materials for our students that would be sufficiently engaging to stimulate them at all or most levels from kindergarten through elementary, but would also be approachable so that they could use them on their own with very little guidance or oversight," said Dr. Clisbee. "That's why we chose BrainPOP as one of our technology programs."

Principal Clisbee also noted that BrainPOP was one of the first educational software programs used by Choix teachers.

"It was through this use that our teachers and students learned to be comfortable with computer-based instruction."

Teaching With BrainPOP

The Choix teachers were introduced to BrainPOP through a customized webinar and chose their teaching units from various BrainPOP resources: the American English version, BrainPOP Français, and BrainPOP Jr., for learners in grades K-3. Individual

teachers incorporate BrainPOP into their classes in different ways. Fourth-grade teacher Léonard Joseph uses BrainPOP Français and BrainPOP in English to support French and English language development.



“Most of the students in our school do not have the opportunity to hear people talking to them in English and in French when they are in their home environment. So, I use BrainPOP as a language teaching tool.”

Third-grade teacher Michelange Jerome uses BrainPOP to “teach science, because it’s really straightforward, simple and clear. I don’t use it to teach languages, but I know it will influence my students’ listening ability in French.” He continued, “I use BrainPOP to reinforce the lessons and then my students can listen to another voice.”

Romain Raynold, who teaches first grade, uses BrainPOP in both French and English to support particular science units his class is studying, such as lessons on the life cycles of butterflies and frogs.

Monsieur Joseph noted that when he uses BrainPOP as a whole-class activity, it is an entertaining, interactive way to introduce a new topic at the same

time to all his students – with lots of multimedia support that makes his lessons “richer” and more “colorful.” When he uses BrainPOP in the technology lab, it is an opportunity for him to differentiate instruction.

“As all my students do not have the same ability, they sometimes work in groups of two on items related to their ability,” he said. “For instance if I am working on fractions as a theme, another group can be working on something else. BrainPOP is designed in a way that makes it easy to teach every single part of a theme.”

After using BrainPOP with her class, kindergarten teacher Victoria Schweinsberg reported how much her students love to learn.

“In most schools in Haiti, learning seems to be about sitting and listening to a teacher and doing activities in a workbook. The children do not respond well to that. They love anything that involves games or hands-on activities that allow them to be creative.”



After Mademoiselle Schweinsberg presents a BrainPOP movie, she has her class discuss it and then engage in related hands-on activities. She noted that her students “respond very well to computer activities and seem to come by it naturally, even though they have no prior experience.”

Principal Clisbee added, “The students are totally enthralled with the educational content with which they engage. Most of our children have never seen a TV or a movie, so animated lessons are totally exciting for them.”

Monsieur Raynold noted that his students particularly like BrainPOP’s cartoon-like presentations and its sense of humor.



Choix educators use the Common Core State Standards to drive the English-based curriculum in ESL and math. They have also created “rapid” assessments in all three languages (French, English, and Creole), directly aligned with the Common Core to identify the students who are in greatest need of remediation.

In considering how educators will assess students’ skill proficiency, School Board Chair Laura Hartman said, “We have a unique situation, since most of our students, no matter how old they were when they entered the school, had never been to school before. They are progressing at different rates, resulting in a huge ability range within each grade. Our immediate goals are to identify the lowest students in math and literacy, in addition to fully developing our standards-based curriculum including assessment.”



Aligning Curriculum and Assessment

Choix is the only rural school in Haiti that engages in systematic assessment of its students’ learning to create benchmark data against verified standards.

Principal Clisbee stated, “It was vital to our choice that BrainPOP is aligned to academic standards similar to our curriculum and is mapped to the Common Core, as is our curriculum.”

Benefits and Outcomes

Monsieur Joseph reported that technology enables students to be much more active in their own learning.

“At first, my students relied on me as the teacher to provide them with everything. Now it’s different. They can go to the computer lab and use BrainPOP to learn something by themselves. Two weeks ago, a

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group of my students went to the lab to use BrainPOP for a short animated science lesson. Then, they took a short quiz related to it. I could not imagine how much joy that brought to their lives. They realized they could learn something by themselves using a specific tool. Only at our school can they have these experiences.”

Reflecting on the changes she sees in the children's attitude toward learning, Principal Clisbee said, “When the school first opened, the children appeared sullen and very quiet. Since we make learning fun at Choix in a school environment that is bright and engaging, the students now smile and laugh and fully socialize with each other and the adults at the school. They have fun, and it shows on their faces and in the way they carry themselves.”

In addition, the Choix teachers have grown professionally.

“The teaching model we use at Choix is different from the traditional model of repetition and memorization,” said Principal Clisbee. “Most teachers have not been exposed to other teaching strategies, so BrainPOP has introduced them to the strength of a research-based program.”

Using BrainPOP has resulted in the expansion of the teachers' “toolbox” – e.g., using multimedia and humor to present concepts—as well as the further development of their understanding of the need for the students to acquire strong technology skills in order to help shape Haiti's future.

Conclusion

L'Ecole de Choix is unique to the education status quo in Haiti, and is serving as a source of positive change. Currently, the quality of the Choix educational experience is out of reach for most Haitians, and school leaders are quite conscious of the role models they are creating both regionally and nationally. Success at “The School of Choice” demonstrates that e-learning is attainable even in developing economies with the right tools and ongoing support and training. Curriculum-based technology programs like BrainPOP contribute to the development of new teaching strategies that help teachers and students see the link between technology literacy and further content exploration. For the future leaders of Haiti, this is a powerful lesson that will help them shape their country's story.

