



Celebrating 21st-Century Learning at the International Student Media Festival  
By Johanna Riddle - Posted Mar 1, 2009

It's a celebration of creative learning through technology. It's a day filled with minds-on, hands-on, collaborative learning experiences. It's a mini-Oscar event, complete with red carpet, lights, and paparazzi. It's the 34th annual International Student Media Festival.

Since 1974, the [International Student Media Festival \(ISMF\)](#) has supported and promoted the power of learning through student-produced media. Sponsored by the [Association for Educational Communications and Technology](#) (AECT), the festival offers opportunities for K–16 students and teachers across the globe to share their work, to acquire new skills, to collaborate on media applications, and to acknowledge their mutual creativity and efforts. This initiative has grown to become the largest and most successful event of its kind.

AECT executive director Phillip Harris, Ph.D., attributes the success of the festival to a growing receptiveness among teachers to student preferences for learning and communicating. "I often refer to the integration of technology in learning as a true school reform initiative," he explained, "as contrasted with so many top-down mandates. This grass-roots change emanates from the classroom, as teachers allow students to use the tools that they are interested in to foster learning. That philosophy of student-centered education, stemming from within the schools, is fundamentally changing the way that learning, and teaching, happens."

That shift in philosophy, and its impact on learning and teaching, was evidenced by the gathering of nearly a thousand students, families, and teachers in November 2008 in Lake Buena Vista, Fla., just across from Downtown Disney. Festival scheduling, location, and calendar of events proved to be just the right formula for 10-year-old Daniel Wedincamp, his classmate Zach Rudolph, and their families. Though this was their third time to submit their media projects to the festival (and to receive awards for their work), this was the boys' first opportunity to actively participate in the festival.

After spending time online looking over a schedule of class offerings that included digital photography and video, clay animation and broadcasting, digital storytelling, web authoring, digital music studio, and game design, the boys chose a video editing workshop. "We ended up taking a class in Adobe Premiere Elements moviemaking. It was pretty good," Zach said, adding that their 2008 festival submission had been created with Microsoft PowerPoint, a program with which boys regularly worked at their school in Savannah, Ga. "Staying at the hotel has been pretty fun too," he added. Both boys also participated in the popular Photo Safari class. "I take pictures a lot," explained Daniel. "And I always want to learn more about that."

Active learning workshops offered at the festival are an important distinction in the International Festival. The collaborative nature of the sessions adds a unique component to the event. When you walk into a lab, you will find parents and their children learning together. Teachers and students work side by side to master the application of new skills. Multiple age groups fill every classroom, and new friendships quickly form as students meet through their common interest in technology. The 2- and 3-hour sessions are jam-packed with hands-on learning opportunities. "You learn so much here, so quickly," commented

18-year-old Lucie Mitregrove. Originally from the Czech Republic and currently residing with her family in Key West, Fla., she attended the 2007 festival in Anaheim, Calif. She was an award winner and the sole emissary for her school.

"Last year, I went [to ISMF] by myself. I received my award, took classes, and got lesson plans to bring back to my teachers," Lucie explains. "This year, we brought 14 people, including my sister, Lenka, to the festival."

Lucie is also involved in the Student Television Network (<http://studenttelevision.com>), which hosts video and broadcasting competitions for high school students. "I like the way that these different festivals integrate and the ways that they differ, because I learn so much from each event," she said. She showed several pieces of original work stored on her iPod, including a public service announcement on hurricane safety and a team-produced music video. "What I like about ISMF is that it is more about learning. I learn so much in a small amount of time."

Six-year-old Faith Cody agrees. She attended the festival with her grandmother, Deborah Gray, an elementary school teacher, who was also visiting ISMF for the first time. Faith participated in a clay animation class offered by Tech for Learning. She was eager to share the details of her experience.

"It was fun! I learned how to make a movie with clay. First, I made a little person out of play dough. I took pictures of my clay and downloaded the pictures. Then, I made my frames. We got to choose our backgrounds, and I chose a pink one," Faith said. Her grandmother was impressed by how quickly Faith picked up the methods and vocabulary of stop-motion animation. Faith looks forward to sharing the results of her work with her family.

"I can show the DVD [I made] on my computer or my TV," she explained. "It makes you feel pretty happy when you can show people what you made yourself and say, 'I made this. I created my own movie!'"

There are several sessions aimed at educators that are new to the festival. First-year teacher Sasha Land and his colleague Aaron Bork traveled from the Pinnacle School in Bloomington, Ind., to ISMF to scope out the event. Sasha participated in a teacher-targeted session on enhancing the classroom with multimedia. "The class was most beneficial to me," Sasha said. "Young teachers know technology and can figure it out quickly. What we are missing is the application to the classroom. I know how to use video editing, but how do I apply it to the curriculum? We want to use technology to teach for understanding," he continued, "because it takes us to levels of learning we could not otherwise reach. For me, the big question is, 'How do I incorporate that? And how do I approach it with my students?' " Both Land and Bork teach in a school that serves the needs of students with dyslexia, dysgraphia, and similar processing differences.

"Our students may have reading difficulties, but their conceptual abilities are over the top," said Sasha, who went on to describe a series of green engineering projects that his fourth and fifth grade students were currently involved in. "Technology gives them the tools to do the things that they need, and want, to do." Both teachers said they were looking forward to checking out some of the new software they experienced at the festival and that they planned to be back next year, this time with students and media entries.

### **The Road to the Festival**

The branching road to the festival usually originates in the classroom, as teachers weave technology through research- and subject-driven studies. The results of that technology infusion manifest as student-

created slideshows, such as Aranquilluk Schuyler's project titled *Yupik Dogs*, which was developed as a learning project for Chief Paul Memorial School in Kipnuk, Alaska; or as a website, such as *Native American Dances*, developed by a student team from Frontier High School in Red Rock, Okla. Videos span the gamut from live broadcasts to public service announcements to documentary films, including 15-year-old Alexa Barrett's *Sean Rising*, a Best of Festival award winner. And podcasts such as *Get Up & Get Moving*, produced by students at Cutter Morning Star Middle School in Hot Springs, Ark., are beginning to make an appearance in the festival lineup as well.

Because creativity is an important consideration in the judging process, there is plenty of edutainment infused into the student projects. Students can laugh and learn about local culture at the same time with the video *Weird Eats, Southern Style*, a collaboration of middle school students from Arthur Williams Middle School in Jesup, Ga. Or they can be drawn in by the hip and edgy flavor of the public service announcement *It Only Takes One*, developed by Erin Island from Armwood High School in Seffner, Fla. The boldly creative rap titled *Going Green*, written, performed, and filmed by South Effingham Elementary's Payton Duke, drew enthusiastic cheers and applause at the evening screening event, while the beautiful photographic essay from Lora Batchelor Middle School in Bloomington, Ind., titled *Spring's Awakening*, mesmerized viewers with transitions of glowing imagery and flowing music.

Many teachers guide their students through independent and collaborative media projects. But some students, like 7-year-old Veroniqua Johnson, develop work independently. Her autobiographical documentary, *Goat Gab*, chronicles her day-to-day activities on the family goat farm. Veroniqua, who transferred to a new elementary school this year, used the technical skills she learned in her previous school to put together her project. The sequential stills story earned a Best of Festival award.

Every spring, students submit their projects to the festival committee for consideration. Each entry must be sponsored by an adult, such as a classroom teacher or a parent. Many entries are submitted for judging directly from school or home. However, some states such as Georgia have developed a well-organized system for encouraging and celebrating media production in their K–12 schools. The Georgia Student Media Festival ([www.gait-inc.org/GSMF/index.htm](http://www.gait-inc.org/GSMF/index.htm)) is modeled after ISMF. Guidelines and deadlines align with the perimeters of the International Festival, at the school, district, and state levels, with participation at the International Student Media Festival at the highest echelon of the experience.

"We see a lot of evidence of the learning value of working through a system like Georgia has developed," commented Deborah Hargroves, a festival committee member who has been involved with both the Georgia and international festivals since 1982. "This process allows students to present their projects, to view other students' work, and to have their media critiqued by professionals. It's a powerful asset for these students, because they are able to apply what they learn to revise and improve their projects. Celebrating and sharing their work builds a passion in these students for creating media. You can see the evidence of this advantage in the strong presence of Georgia students at the International Festival." It is indeed evident, with Georgia K–12 students comprising a whopping 23% of the 2008 winning festival entries. "ISMF is currently working with Georgia to create a model for a festival that can be replicated by other states and countries," added Hargroves.

ISMF uses the Modern Danish System in judging student entries. Entries are not compared; rather, they are each judged against a set of criteria. All projects that meet the standards of excellence for production, creativity, communication, and thoughtfulness are recognized by ISMF with an Excellence in Media award. About 10% of the winning entries are further recognized with a Judges Favorite designation. A very select number of exemplary entries earn the coveted Best of Festival award. Each entry is scored by a team of judges, who then average their scores for a final tally.

## Linking to Learning

Donna Swainson-Robinson, director of technology and assisted instruction at CedarBridge Academy in Devonshire Parish, Bermuda, brought 20 upper school students to the festival. "We actually have one graduate with us," she said. "He has been participating in the International Student Media Festival for the last 3 years and didn't want to miss out on the experience just because he finished the academy, so we brought him along." That's typical of the power of technology to engage students in learning, she added. "Motivating students to take on difficult subject matter can be challenging. Technology is the key." Stanford University, the University of Virginia, and Bermuda educators collaborated to develop a new technology curriculum for Bermuda schools. "I've never seen such a turnaround in students. One day, we had a routine fire drill on campus, and it was all that I could do to pry the students out of their seats. They simply didn't want to leave their work. As soon as the 'all clear' bell rang, they rushed back to the classroom so that they could continue. That tells you everything you need to know about the effectiveness of the program," she said.

Bermuda's educational policy requires that students take at least one field trip per subject area during each school year. "I had been looking for an event like ISMF for about 10 years," explained Swainson-Robinson. "This is the one that engages them, builds on their skills, and offers them a showcase for the work they produce during the school year." Her students maximize the benefits by dispersing among the classes offered at the festival. "When we get back home, we all share what we learned here."

The educational benefits of the International Student Media Festival have caught the attention of corporate sponsors as well. [Adobe, Inc.](#) has become a top sponsor, providing a cadre of Adobe teachers, computer labs, student prizes, and other elements essential to the success of the 3-day event. "We see our participation in the festival as an important way to support what is going on in our schools and classrooms," remarked Adobe K-12 senior marketing manager Lisa Deakes. "It's inspiring to see how today's students are using technology to learn and to express themselves, and equally as exciting to see how teachers are encouraging that inclusion. That's where the world of education is heading. And Adobe is a part of that."

### **The Future of the Festival**

AECT records indicate that the number of festival entries is growing by about 20% each year. ISMF planners are responding to this by expanding festival events and categories. For example, a preconference photo shoot at NASA Kennedy Space Center and related, multimedia workshops were added to the 2008 festival offerings. The 2009 conference, to be held in Louisville, Ky., will feature a full-day workshop on integrated learning through technology, aimed at classroom teachers.

The festival also grows as technology changes and new sponsors come on board. For example, [Promethean](#), makers of the interactive whiteboards found in so many classrooms today, are bringing a new dimension to the interactive stills category by providing special recognition and awards for student work developed with ActivStudio software.

Students see clear benefits to the festival additions that reflect the changes they are experiencing in their world. "Lots of teachers tend to stick with what they know," observed 15-year-old Lenka Mitregrove. "They latch onto one program, you know, they get comfortable with it—and [they] use it again and again in the classroom, when there might be a better program. There's all kinds of stuff out there," she added. "And we can see how those can work when we come to a place like this. [The festival's multiage media workshops] also show teachers how students can help them with technical problems, if they will just let them." Ten-year-old Daniel Wedencamp was even more to the point. "Our teachers need to know technology, and we need to be doing more of it at school. Technology, to me, is a bridge to the future," he explained earnestly, "because technology is going to be in my future. And I need to be learning about it right now."

To learn more about the International Student Media Festival and how you and your students can participate, log onto [www.ismf.net](http://www.ismf.net). To view student entries, log on to SchoolTube at [www.schooltube.com](http://www.schooltube.com) and type ISMF in the search bar.

**Johanna Riddle** writes and teaches on the topic of integrated learning and multiple literacies, drawing on 25 years of experience as a classroom teacher, art teacher, arts administrator, and media specialist. Johanna is the author of *Engaging the Eye Generation* (Stenhouse, 2009). Her work in the classroom has been featured in T.H.E. Journal and has been the subject of an Adobe educational video. She is nationally certified in media education, a Fulbright Scholar, and an Adobe Education Leader. Email her at [msbooklady@msn.com](mailto:msbooklady@msn.com).

## The Power of Student-Produced Media

When 15-year-old Alexa Barrett, a student at Ross High School in Southampton, N.Y., approached Sean Biesty about featuring in a short film for a school video project, he readily agreed. But he had no inkling of the wide impact that the video would have on his life and the lives of others.

It was Alexa's aim to chronicle the story of Sean, who was involved in an automobile accident that resulted in severe brain injury. At the age of 21, Sean awakened from a coma, unable to move or speak. His fierce determination to fight his way back has manifested in an odyssey of progress that has defied every expectation. Six years later, he is able to walk, to speak, to type, to return to school, and to live independently, with the help of a home healthcare giver. He also attends screenings of *Sean Rising*, the documentary that features his story. Sean made the plane trip from New York to Florida—his first flight in 6.5 years—and was on hand to answer questions and encourage the young media makers attending the International Student Media Festival.

Sean was especially interested in Best of Festival film produced by then-first-graders at Joan Martin Elementary in Hobart, Ind. The live-action video, titled *Attitude Is Everything*, follows the day-to-day activities of Thais Carrillo and her friends. Thais was born with cerebral palsy, and she uses braces and crutches to help her navigate through her school day, participate in play time, and hang out with her friends. Sean talked with her about her film. "You're just in second grade," he said, "but you're already doing what needs to be done. You're helping people to understand more. It might not always be easy," he advised Thais. "But live your life with courage. Look at you. You've already won a film award. Nothing can get in your way, because you're not going to let it."

Alexa's 7.5-minute documentary has received numerous accolades, including the International Student Media Festival's Best of Festival award. As word of the video has spread, Sean has become a harbinger of possibility for brain-injured patients, including wounded soldiers returning from Iraq. "I never dreamed it would reach this far," he said. "Wow. I don't know if I can express all of this. ... I think it impacts the lives of people who have been injured and the families of those people. It also reminds everyone that we are human beings. It's hard. You fail, and you fail again, but you have to keep trying. We do what we have to do, just like everyone else. For a long time, I felt underutilized." He added, "But now I have a focus. I know that my life is making a difference."

*Sean Rising* can be viewed at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z0p9sLgqXGQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z0p9sLgqXGQ).