

New, Inclusive “Flat Friends” Project Promotes Active Communication and Connection for Students of All Abilities

Using fun templates that support writing, comprehension and language development, students of all abilities can interact with others around the world

By Suzanne Feit and Jane Odom

For over a decade, students in traditional classrooms across North America have delighted in cross-curricular activities based on Flat Stanley,* the popular character from the book of the same title written by John Nash. Now, students can use technology and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices to join in on the fun!

Prentke Romich Company (PRC), a worldwide leader in AAC technology, has collaborated with Cambium Learning Technologies to launch the “Flat Friends” project, which gives teachers and their students an entertaining and educational way to connect with others via the Internet. Using Classroom Suite, students will be able to experience life outside the classroom and travel virtually to places around the world.

“Inspiring creativity and building community while having fun enriches learning,” says Russell Cross, PRC’s Vice President of Product Management. “As an employee-owned company dedicated to enabling communication without limitations for those with speech disabilities, we are excited to collaborate on a project that will enable AAC users and others to network with fellow students worldwide while enhancing literacy.”

Flat Stanley activities typically extend into numerous curriculum areas. In Language Arts, for example, students compose letters to introduce Stanley and mail his picture to friends to decorate and mail back. The letters and pictures that are returned are incorporated into reading, geography, art and math lessons.

The Flat Friends project is similar, but adds a twist. Students will meet new “flat” characters – including Flat Chase, Flat Caroline and Flat Hoover, a rescue dog who uses a wheelchair – and accompany them on adventures. In addition, students can become flat themselves and share their pictures, biographies, thoughts and stories on the Internet. They

also can share pictures of their pets or neighborhoods, and upload audio files.

As teachers incorporate the lessons and modify templates in Classroom Suite, their students will have the opportunity to learn more about the locations of their new flat friends, as well as the similarities and differences in their schools and communities.

The Flat Friends activities can be downloaded by teachers and students everywhere, whether they use AAC devices or not, making the project truly inclusive.

Templates and activities are being developed using IntelliTools Classroom Suite platform, and are paired with educational standards, lesson plans and measurable goals. The variety of templates and activities provides an opportunity for students to participate at many different levels, and supportive writing prompts, story starters and language pattern strategies are in place to promote student success.

Flat Friends materials are being tested in AAC classrooms, as well as regular education and special education programs at numerous schools around the country. We are also including a group of adult AAC users in Arizona to gauge the potential of the technology to help people of all ages with writing, literacy and international networking.

While the project will not officially launch until early 2009, initial activities and templates are available now at the Activity Exchange section of the IntelliTools Web site at www.intellitools.com, and from the Teaching Materials Exchange section of the PRC Web site at www.teaching.prentrom.com (Flat Friends activities begin with the letters “FFP”). Several of the creators will also be introducing the project at the Closing The Gap Conference in October.

FLAT FRIENDS CREATORS ARE INDUSTRY COLLEAGUES

The Flat Friends project began with a team of speech and language and assistive tech-

nology consultants from around the country who donated their time to develop the initial activities. Collaborators include Suzanne Feit, Curriculum Development and Training Specialist with Cambium Learning Technologies; Jane Odom, M.Ed., Educational Segment Manager for PRC; Dan Herlihy, AT Specialist, Connective Technology Solutions; Dr. Caroline Musselwhite, CCC/SLP, AT Specialist, AAC Intervention; Patti Rea, Adaptive Technology; and Byron Wilkes, President, Learning Magic, Inc.

BECOME PART OF THE “MOST RELIABLE NETWORK”

Because special education teachers can’t always follow a specific curriculum and have to be creative and versatile to meet the needs of their students, the support they can give each other is invaluable. That support is also the basis for the AT-Most Reliable Network that the creators of the Flat Friends project are hoping to build among teachers, therapists, parents and assistive technology users around the world. By sharing best practices in integrating teaching and technology, network participants hope to ‘close the gap’ by enabling more students to find their voice and connect with others around the world.

To join or learn more about the Flat Friends project, contact Joan Odom at 1-800-262-1984, ext. 476 or jmo.cons@prentrom.com; or reach Suzanne Feit at SFeit@intellitools.com

More details about the Flat Friends project will be presented in October at the Closing The Gap Annual Conference in Minneapolis. Plan to attend the “AT: The Most Reliable Network” session on Saturday, October 18, 9:30 - 10:30 a.m.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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* Flat Stanley is copyrighted and is not used in Flat Friends activities. ■

MEET THE FLAT FRIENDS

Initial activities introduce students to Flat Chase, a 9-year-old from Arizona; Flat Caroline, a 10-year-old from Texas, and Flat Hoover, a rescue dog who uses a wheelchair. Teachers can download their biographies to learn more about them and copy and paste them into classroom scenes and then encourage students to share stories.

Sample activities – All activities will begin with the letters FFP (Flat Friends Project)

- Join the network by downloading the FFP Invitation to Visit letter. Using the brainstorming letter template, you can compose the letter to invite Flat Chase to virtually come and visit your class. You will tell him what clothes, food and activities that you can share with him when he arrives. The letter can be sent via e-mail. The response will be story written by Chase who is 9 and lives in Phoenix. You will also get graphics to virtually put him into your stories and share your activities on the activity exchange.

- The FFP Hoover and Me and FFP Bio-Auto are two templates that encourage students to learn to write their autobiographies. These

templates provide students with an example or partner assisted modeling to help understand how to compose a biography vs an autobiography.

- Two ready-to-use templates from Patti Rea are the “Flat Friends Puzzle” and “Flat Caroline and Flat Chase Visit the Farm.” Both encourage writing about the two characters as they explore life on the farm. After opening the puzzle and clicking the mouse to reveal puzzle pieces, the student hears a farm animal sound as the scene builds. When the barn is finally revealed, an animation shows both characters surrounded by the animals.

When opening and exploring the book, the student has numerous pages with farm animal photographs pre-inserted. Each page has a toolbar containing both characters and additional animal graphics to insert into the scenes. A text box is also provided so students can write a unique interpretation about each page of the book.

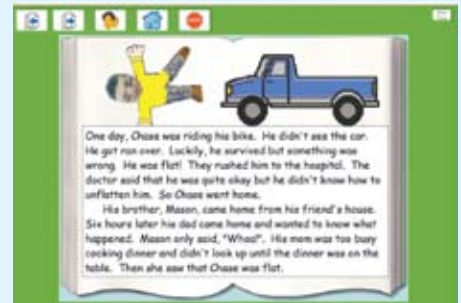
- Three activity sets from Learning Magic, Inc. let students direct Flat Chase and Flat Hoover on multiple paths during adventures to various geographical destinations, including Arches National Park in Utah. Each

page has either a photo or short video of the environment. A reading and writing activity is provided to provide further background content about the place the student is visiting. Students can also write or express their own thoughts about what they have learned by clicking on a toolbar that inserts pictures of the environment onto a page. An optional comprehension activity quizzes students on their understanding of where Flat Chase and Flat Hoover have visited. Built-in grading and data collection capabilities are included.

- Imagination-based activities developed by Dan Herlihy tie into the kinds of Flat Stanley activities that students have been enjoying for years. These include “addressing an envelope” to write to their new flat friends and mapping “My Flat Friends” to show states where they’ve received mail from pen pals. The “Easy Animate/My Flat Image” activity lets students create a flattened version of themselves to animate, and a Prepositions activity lets them animate their flattened image up, down, inside, and more.

NEWS-2-YOU TO FEATURE FLAT STANLEY, THE INSPIRATION FOR FLAT FRIENDS

News-2-You, the weekly online newspaper for beginning readers and individuals with special needs, will feature Flat Stanley in its October 20 newspaper, covering the story of his creation and the theater company now touring with a musical adaptation of the concept. The newspaper is produced in four different reading levels and includes over 50 activity pages that use the Flat Stanley vocabulary to target specific academic areas. Online games, a cartoon, and a storybook further reinforce that vocabulary. News-2-You will also provide an extension activity using Intellitools Classroom Suite that students can share around the world. Go to www.news-2-you.com for more information.



Flat Chase, age 9, shares his story using Classroom Suite.



Using IntelliTools Classroom Suite software and her PRC Vantage Plus, Schuyler Rummel-Hudson composes a Flat Friends story in which she appears as a mermaid.



FFP Hoover and Me supports students in writing their autobiography. They can read about Hoover and then think about their own likes, dislikes and feelings.