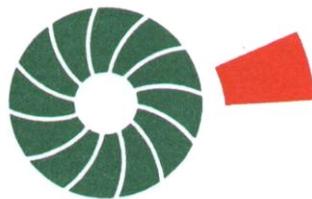Country Education Project

E-KIDS RURAL EXPRESS

Rural Extension Learning Online

A partnership project

between

Country Education Project

and

Helen Macpherson Smith Trust

Evaluation of Pilot Project

September 2007

Background

The development of the "*E Kids Rural Express*" initiative is a result of discussions held with numerous individuals and school communities across rural and remote Victoria during 2006. Staff and parents from across the state expressed a desire to explore innovative strategies to support rural and remote students' involvement in extension programs.

Additionally, there was a strong desire for such initiatives to be developed and provided within their local communities, without students having to leave their home to access such learning in regional or metropolitan centres - thus providing the opportunity to build the capacity of local rural and remote communities.

In the past there have been examples where rural and remote parents have moved their child to another school to ensure their child's academic abilities are met – such schools are generally located within larger regional centres or metropolitan Melbourne.

Later in 2006, the Country Education Project Inc. met with representatives from the Victorian Department of Education, the Deans of Education and the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust to explore the development of an approach that would support the involvement of rural and remote young people in extension programs. Funding for the initial pilot project to operate during 2007 was received from the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust.

In the development of this pilot program, Country Education Project Inc. investigated extension learning programs currently operating in other states of Australia and explored their relevance to the Victorian context. CEP was particularly interested in the CELO approach within Tasmania which utilizes an online classroom through the WebVC technology in providing extension programs.

Utilizing the information collected, an extension learning program focusing on upper primary school students across the curriculum areas of literacy, maths and science/technology.

The pilot project developed centred on an online classroom with support from task setters, teacher trainees as mentors and a project co-ordinator.

September 2007

Pilot Project

Aims

The aims of the program are

- To provide extension and challenging experiences for talented students in an online environment, and to provide opportunities for interaction among these students who are widely separated geographically and live in rural and remote Victorian communities.

- To provide a range of extension programs aimed initially at primary aged students in rural and remote Victoria.

- To facilitate the establishment of a supported virtual classroom to deliver online extension activities and peer networks for talented rural students.

- To develop partnerships between rural and remote school communities, universities, Department of Education and Training and CEP Inc to support an extension program for students in rural and remote Victoria.

- To develop a sustainable approach to the provision of extension learning for young people in rural and remote communities of Victoria.

Project Outline

The *E-Kids Rural Express* program began in Term II of 2007 with 35 students from rural and remote schools across Victoria, predominantly at Grade Five and Six level. The program expanded to involve 95 students from Grade Five and Six for Term III and IV.

The *E-Kids Rural Express* program contains a number of key elements;

(a)   On-Line Classroom:
The *E-Kids Rural Express* project operates through a secure online classroom (Web Shell), providing opportunities for talented students.

Students are arranged in groups of three or four, according to their interests. They share a number of assigned E-Mentors (teacher trainees) who provide support and feedback. Students work at their own pace, choosing activities that interest them and are encouraged to share their work via the presentation areas within the online classroom.

The students involved in *E-Kids Rural Express* undertake a range of tasks, including;

- being part of a *small online group* with students from other rural schools with the support of E-Mentors;
- undertaking *set tasks* in the areas of Literacy, Mathematics and Science/Technology;
- designing a *"Homepage"* about themselves
- involvement in *online group discussions*;
- participation within the *"Discussion Board"* on a range of topics, set by the Project Coordinator;
- utilising the *Voice Board* facility to record and listen to voice messages and/or speak with their peers/E-Mentor in 'real' time;
- involvement in occasional *face-to-face gatherings* held at a state level;
- involvement in *online forums on specific topics* with guest speakers or identified themes or topics.

Students are expected to:

- be committed to the *E-Kids Rural Express* project throughout a school term;
- visit the online classroom at least twice per week;
- maintain regular contact with E-Mentors and other E-Kid students;
- complete tasks and forward to E-Mentors for feedback;
- participate in the Discussion Board and small group discussions;
- value diversity and be sensitive to the uniqueness of each situation and each individual;
- take the opportunity to learn from fellow E-Kid students and the feedback provided by their E-Mentors;
- seek and utilise help from the Project Coordinator if problems arise in mentoring relationships.

(b)   Face to Face Workshops (Orientation Days):

With the aim of enabling E-Kid students to interact with each other and build meaningful relationships, opportunities for face to face meetings at the beginning of Term II and also Term III have been provided.

On these days, students gathered at the Melbourne Museum, meeting their peers and E–Mentors, exploring the Museum and attending a tutorial with the Project Coordinator on the workings of the online classroom. These workshops provided a great way for encouraging greater interaction between the students and home/school in the on-line classroom and addressing one of the project main aims; that of addressing student's geographical isolation.

(c)   E-Mentors:

A unique component of the program is that of utilising third and fourth year teacher trainees as mentors for the E-Kid students. Their involvement provides a valuable opportunity for these teacher trainees to gain practical involvement in providing learning, offers scope for experience in rural and remote education and gain an understanding of the potential that e-learning provides, all whilst linked to their tertiary studies.

Teacher trainees from Australian Catholic University and Deakin University have supported the E-Kid students in their learning via this mentoring role. They provide regular feedback on the activities the students choose to undertake and work closely with the Project Coordinator to ensure quality and privacy issues are adhered to. Teams of E-Mentors (3) work with a small group of students, assisting students in understanding and completing set tasks, providing feedback to completing tasks and contributing to on line discussions.

(d)   School-Based Contact Person:

In each participating school, a contact person for enrolled E-Kid students is nominated. Whilst such people have primarily been classroom teachers, the school-based contact person may also be an interested teacher, parent or SSO staff member.

They act as the 'bridge' between the Project Coordinator and the students at the school receiving regular communication (via e-mail) from the Project Coordinator detailing important information regarding the program and providing feedback to the Project Coordinator regarding student learning.

These contacts are also expected to support students in the work they are completing and liaise with other relevant school or community personnel about the program.

(e)   Guest Presenters:

Scheduled at least once each term, a guest appearance is made by a person with a specific area of expertise to "talk" to the E-Kids. These guest presenters leave a number of brief voice messages, introducing themselves and outlining their occupation or area of expertise before "talking" and interacting live with the E-Kid students at a scheduled time.

An equine veterinarian, a Museum curator and a musician have all volunteered their time and expertise as a Guest Presenter on *E-Kids Rural Express*.

(f)   Project Coordinator:

The overall coordination of *E-Kids Rural Express* has been provided by an experienced teacher with specialisation in the teaching of ICT and provision of learning for talented students.

This teacher was provided from a partnership developed between a rural school and the Country Education Project to release the teacher for two days per week,

The Project Coordinator has developed and monitored the online classroom and undertaken the primary functions of:

- providing overall coordination for the development of curriculum and learning activities with Tasksetters and other key people and organisations;
- liaison between the E-Mentors (and their universities) in forging a mentor role within the program- including training for the E-Mentors as required;
- liaising between the program and the School-Based Contact Person;
- promoting the program to rural and remote Victorian schools;
- coordinating the selection and assessment of students;
- ensuring that the protocols, expectations and rights of all involved are clearly identified and monitored;
- providing weekly e-mails on the latest news and information pertaining to *E-Kids Rural Express*.

(g)   Tasksetters:

Two experienced teachers have been employed on a casual basis to write tasks specifically for students enrolled in *E-Kids Rural Express.* These people work up to five hours each week; having access to the on-line classroom and ensuring that tasks are appropriate both for student's capabilities and also for remote delivery.

All tasks include an assessment rubric and are linked to the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS).

(h)   Lou's Loopy's:

Each week, a small, 'quirky' problem is posted on the classroom's main screen for students to consider and respond to. The initial problem or "Loopy" is then built upon in subsequent weeks with complications relating to the initial problem.

It is not mandatory for students to attempt the "Lou's Loopy" problems.

In undertaking to solve a "Lou's Loopy", students may refer to their E-Mentors for assistance with all discussion and attempts at solving a "Lou's Loopy" being posted under a topic heading on the Discussion Board.

Evaluation

The Approach

As part of the pilot project, an action- based research evaluation has been undertaken.

This took the form of;

(i)   Surveys – electronic surveys were sent to all E-Kid students, School Based Contact people, Project Coordinator, E-Mentors and Tasksetters.

(ii)   Conversations – were undertaken with a number of people through phone interviews, Conversations have been undertaken with School Based Contact people, E-Mentors, Project Coordinator, parents and Tasksetters.

(iii)   Data collected from the online classroom – information was gained detailing student participation and involvement in the various activities of the E-Kids program.

Key Findings

The *E-Kids Rural Express* program was initially developed, and resourced, to accommodate approximately fifty students during 2007. The actual participation of students in this program has exceeded all expectations.

In Term II, 35 students were enrolled with the support of 7 E-Mentors and a Project Coordinator.

In Term III and IV, 90 students were involved with the support of 60 E-Mentors and a Project Coordinator.

A total of 34 rural and remote schools have enrolled students within the *E-Kids Rural Express* project.

The pilot project has been designed primarily for Grades 5 and 6 students, focussing on the three curriculum areas of literacy, maths and science/technology. The tasks are written at a level two years above the child's current enrolment.

A wide variety of tasks have been developed- see "*Tasks*" at the conclusion of this report.

The general feedback received from students, E-Mentors, project staff, parents and school staff included:

- There is overwhelming support for the provision of extension learning for students within rural and remote schools provided through an online classroom approach.

- Through the online classroom the geographical isolation of rural and remote students had been bridged.

- The unexpected growth of student enrolments has not only placed extra pressure on the financial and personal resources of the project, but also highlights the high demand for such an approach in rural and remote Victoria.

- The information provided through the Student and E-Mentor Information Booklets was extremely valuable to those involved and was referenced throughout the semester.

- Student selection criteria were developed for the Term III and IV intake of students- streamlining the selection process and providing a valuable tool for the ongoing assessment of these students.

- "The opportunity to be involved in an online classroom was great".

- Students indicated that receiving 'extra' work was interesting as the content and delivery was different to what they had been accustomed to within a school based classroom environment.

- Students have forged relationships with other 'like-minded' students through online conversations and tasks.

- In a small number of cases, schools used their E-Kids Rural Express as an opportunity to provide additional learning's for their students with minimal support from the school. This resulted in students from these schools not being committed to the project. This has shown up in participation and contribution data.

- The flexibility offered by *E-Kids Rural Express* in relation to when and where it can be accessed was a particular strength. Tasks can be completed offline to suit availability of technology and access to the internet in both classrooms and the student's home.

In addition to the general feedback received from parents, staff, students, tasksetters, Project Coordinator and teacher trainees, a number of additional comments were received in relation to the specific components of the project.

These are detailed over the next few pages.

i) The Online Classroom

As mentioned earlier in this report, the online component of the project involved a range of tasks, discussion groups and chat facilities through a secure online classroom.

Student Participation and Contribution:

Student participation within *E-Kids Rural Express* consisted of students logging in to the password protected classroom, checking their e-mails from the Project Coordinator, E-Mentors and fellow E-Kids students, reading the discussion board, checking messages left on the voice board and accessing tasks.

Students' contribution to the online classroom occurred via posting of messages on the discussion board, recording voice messages for others to listen to, or uploading a completed task. Each E-Kid student logged-in, read articles and contributed their responses at their own pace. The number of contributions made by students involved in the program varied from student to student.

The table below details the student participation and contribution rates within the online classroom.

Student Participation and Contributions	
Average Participation per Student *(the number of times students visited tasks or discussion topics within the online classroom per week)*	42
Variance of Participation *(the variation of visits made by students on tasks and discussions online per week)*	10 to 90 visits per student per week
Contribution per Student *(the number of times students posted a message, or task in response to a discussion topic or set task per week)*	16
Variance in Contribution *(the variation in contributions to tasks/discussion topics online per week)*	1 to 9 contributions per student per week

Should an E-Kids student be absent from the online classroom for a period of longer than one week, the E-Mentor would report this to the Project Coordinator, who would in turn, contact the student's school-based contact person to ascertain the reason for their absence. This occurred on only five occasions and each time there was a valid reason for their inactivity (E.g. student absence from school, school camp, etc).

The feedback received in relation to the online classroom

- All students involved in *E-Kids Rural Express* logged-in regularly (at least twice each week). The majority of these students accessed the online classroom through the facilities provided at their schools. A number of students who had access to suitable ICT facilities within their own home elected to make contributions and communicate with their fellow E-Kids students in their personal time. The use of the online classroom within students own time grew as they got to know their fellow students and E-Mentors. Often E-Kid students would develop their own arrangements to meet with fellow students online for discussion, task discussions and chat.

- The majority of students have read many items, and posted completed tasks, or contributed to discussions as required by the project.

- A small number of students were "quiet observers"; seldom contributing to the discussions, or completing tasks set. In addition, there were a minority of students who were less frequent in their participation. When they did read items of interest, they consistently contributed a response, or completed tasks set.

- The online classroom provided a great opportunity for talented students to be involved in a range of extension learning activities.

- Teachers and parents were pleased that their talented students had the opportunity to be extended in their learning through activities not generally available through their local education provision arrangement's

- The School-Based Support Personnel commented that they felt there were a wide range of tasks available and they were presented as both imaginative and challenging to the E-Kid students.

- The open-ended nature of many tasks encouraged students to explore possible variables and think creatively.

- Correspondence from classroom teachers would indicate that the tasks have been challenging but engaging.

- Comments relating to the children spending additional time on tasks to produce a quality product have been made by the classroom teachers which would indicate that students are conscious of producing quality work despite *E-Kids Rural Express* being beyond their 'normal' classroom.

- One teacher commented, *"The tasks have been terrific for my students as they want to discuss the activities with each other, even before school!"*

- One area for future consideration was highlighted by one teacher:

  "*I think that there has been a range of tasks that overall have been very suitable but, if a student was nominated on the basis of outstanding maths ability, I could see that they could be very challenged (and perhaps not enjoy) the English tasks that they have been expected to complete*".

- Schools were extremely appreciative of the VELS information detailed on each task as it provided valuable information for reporting on student learning.

- The longer, more complex tasks appeared to concern students when considering the deadline for submitting them to their E-Mentor; primarily due to lack of allocated *E-Kids Rural Express* time within the school day.

- Students offered constructive feedback about future task content and delivery; suggesting that tasks that promoted greater interactivity (using programs such as 'Gamemaker'), would interest and motivate them.

- Students also highlighted their interest in expanding the variety of tasks into more interest specific themes (E.g. zoology and medieval history).

- It provided a great opportunity to link teacher trainees in a "real life" learning scenario using technology as part of their teacher training

- The appearance and working of the online classroom through WebVC platform was problematic for students and E-Mentors due to the number of functions and layout. A number of students commented on the layout not being that easy to navigate. A proportion of students reported difficulty in 'uploading' their finished work to their E-Mentor and the online classroom.

- The technological skills required of participants to use the online classroom was sometimes beyond their existing skill base – this was also the case with a number of school based contact people.

- Initially, the majority of schools provided informal access for students enrolled in *E-Kids Rural Express* through their "own time". Those schools that timetabled sessions for students proved to be more effective for positive student outcomes. Classroom teachers quickly appreciated that for the program to be of value for both teachers and students, consistent timetabling needed to be provided. Schools liaising with the Project Coordinator and monitoring the progress of the students was essential.

- The Discussion Board facility of *E-Kids Rural Express* acted as the pivotal mechanism of communication. This communication was based upon personal responses to stimulating questions centred on contentious issues (some topics set by the Project Coordinator and others posted by the E-Kids themselves), completed tasks which fellow E-Kids could view and topics of personal interest; E.g. gaming and art.

- The highest level of student engagement on the Discussion Board was evident in two main areas; student generated topics (under the broad heading of "Discussions I Would Like to See") and areas to which compulsory tasks were uploaded for public viewing. See Appendix 1 for a detailed list of topic areas.

ii) Face to Face Workshops:

Provided at the beginning of each term, the Face-to Face Workshops were designed for students to meet their fellow students, the Project Co-ordinators and E-mentors. The workshops also provided the opportunity for students to gain an understanding of how the online classroom operates and to be engaged in exciting activities provided by the Melbourne Museum.

In Term II, twenty-one students attended the Face-to Face Workshop. Fifty-three students attended in Term III, accompanied by forty-nine E-Mentors and their lecturers.

The feedback received from all participants included:

- Student feedback from these days was overwhelmingly positive; endorsing not only the scheduled activities for the day but the opportunity to meet and interact with their online peers and mentors.

- The E-Mentors also indicated that they enjoyed the opportunity to meet with their allocated E-Students, making their role more fulfilling by developing relationships with their students beyond the 'virtual' sphere.

- Teachers strongly endorsed the effectiveness of this event, observing-

  "*Our students (who live a long way from the city), have had that isolation somewhat alleviated by the E-Kids program. In particular, it has been good for the kids to have the opportunity to meet and interact with other students with similar interests and abilities at various levels*".

- A number of E-Kid students were accompanied to the Face-to-Face Workshops by parents and in the case of schools with more than one student participating in *E-Kids Rural Express*, many opted to car pool. The cost of this transport was borne by the parents who in some cases created undue financial pressure.

- The days program was very tight and there needed to be more time for people to acquaint themselves with the online classroom.

- The occasional face to face meeting is a powerful incentive for active student involvement in the project. The participation level within *E-Kids Rural Express* has been more pronounced for those students who attended the Face-to Face Workshops.

iii) E-Mentors

During Term II of the program, a total of seven E-Mentors supported five students each. These E-Mentors generally operated as an individual with their small group of E-Kids.

During Term III and IV, sixty E-Mentors supported ninety students- with a group of four E-Mentors responsible for a cohort of three students. It was felt that groups of E-Mentors working with small groups of E-Kids would be extremely worthwhile for the teacher trainees as well as the E-Kid students.

Country Education Project

The following table details the rates of E-Mentor participation and contribution;

E-Mentor Participation and Contributions	
Average Participation per E-Mentor *(the number of times e-mentors visited tasks or discussions topics being undertaken by students within the online classroom per week)*	43
Variance of Participation *(the variation of visits made by e-mentors on tasks and discussions online per week)*	9 to 64 visits per E-Mentor per week
Contribution per E-Mentor *(the number of times E-Mentors provided feedback to students in relation to discussion topics or tasks per week)*	5
Variance in Contribution *(the variation in feedback to tasks/discussion topics online per week)*	1 to 8 contributions per student per week

From the beginning of Term III, Country Education Project Inc., and two partner universities (Australian Catholic University, Ballarat and Deakin University, Burwood), formalised the E-Mentoring role so that it was encompassed into an elective unit of study in their formal teacher training program. This greatly benefits the teacher trainees as their practical involvement as an E-Mentor role is now included in their study load and not additional to it.

For the E-Kid students, there is security knowing that their team of E-Mentors are frequent in their communication and feedback to them. The feedback to tasks, involvement in group discussions and general conversations with E-Kid students is extremely valuable to the E-Kid students in both an academic and social sense.

Specific feedback gained through discussions held with teacher trainees and the university staff included;

- In general, the E-Mentors communicated with their students at least once each week.

- It was evident that the more regular the E-Mentor's communicated with their E-Kids student group, the more likely those students would be active participants and contributors to the program.

- E-Mentors are better able to consider the value of e-learning and its implications on teaching and learning practices as part of their teacher training. Working with an e-learning platform prepares teacher trainees for the more flexible, and emerging approaches available to support the provision of learning.

- The project has provided an excellent opportunity for teacher trainees to interact with talented students and to closely examine the level of work and learning approaches required for such students.

- While the E-Mentors may be inexperienced in relation to teaching and the use of e-learning, they have been supported by their tutor and the team approach provided through this project.

- The involvement of teams of teacher trainees in this project has provided a valuable opportunity for the universities to utilise a peer learning approach to their teacher training

- In some cases, E-Mentor teams tended to leave feedback and communication to one member of their mentoring team. Future projects should consider the universities monitoring of E-Mentors involvement.

- University lecturers indicated that longer preparation time was required to ensure comprehensive briefing of E-Mentors and links to units studied are made.

- The teacher training schedules finish prior to a school year raises some difficulties in supporting E-Kid students through the full school terms. This is especially the case in Term IV.

- The assessment rubrics and VELS statements for each task provided by this project, provided the E-Mentors with the opportunity to link VELS to online learning,

iv) School Based Support People

It is a requirement of the program that each student has a school-based support person. The majority of these were teachers.

This role has provided a valuable support for the E-Kid students involved in the project as well as providing a valuable link with the project co-ordinator.

The feedback from people involved in the project included:

- Very quickly in the program, it became apparent that those students who were supported and encouraged by their School-Based Support Person had the highest rates of interaction and completed tasks.

- Schools who provide regular time for E-Kid students to participate in the program as part of their school curriculum demonstrate to their students that this is viewed as an important component of their learning and not merely something to occupy them when they had finished their assigned school work.

- E-Kid students are more involved in the online learning when the School Based Support Person reads the weekly newsletters that are sent, via e-mail, from the Project Coordinator and are then able to check with their students whether they have completed assigned tasks or explored new features of the *E-Kids Rural Express* online classroom.

- Incorporating the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) and a checklist/rubric (completed by both the E-Mentor and E-Kids student) has provided *E-Kids Rural Express* a greater credibility in the eyes of the School-Based Support Person. Consequently, this has been found to encourage teachers to explicitly timetable regular sessions for their enrolled students.

- In a number of cases, schools passed on the student participation fee ($70 for Terms III and IV), to the parents of E-Kid students. In future, schools themselves will be expected to meet this cost to alleviate direct financial pressure on parents.

- To fully enable the School Based Support People to fulfil their role within this extended learning approach, greater support and information needs to be provided by *E-Kids Rural Express* – for example, information packages specifically written for their unique role.

- Reporting student assessment through the E-Kids project would be beneficial for schools as a means of tracking student learning and providing reports to parents on student academic achievements. This is an area that needs to be incorporated into any future online projects.

v) Guest Presenters

During the project duration there have been a number of guest presentations made by people with special expertise. These guest presentations included specialist discussion groups, set tasks and interactive discussion at set times within the online classroom.

Dr. Peter Cakebread from the University of Melbourne (specialising in equine veterinary science), recorded voice messages for the E-Kid students to listen to and subsequently replied to their questions via the Discussion Board facility.

Another example of a guest speaker involved the Museum of Victoria who provided a range of interactive puzzles for E-Kid students to complete and have scheduled one of their curators to make a guest appearance in Term IV.

In addition, the project is planning to involve a small number of musicians from the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra later in the year for those E-kid students interested in music.

The feedback received from the various participants, as well as by the guest speakers was overwhelming. Specific feedback included:

- Whilst the E-Kid students were initially a little slower than expected to embrace this opportunity, once they had taken the time to participate, they readily left questions and responses. High levels of student contribution were evident in relation to the guest presenters.
- E-Mentors were keen to be involved in the guest presenters' activities with many listening in to the live guest appearance.
- School-based support personnel reported that once they had ensured that all technical equipment was set-up to link in to the audio (headphones, microphone, etc) students were able to easily access and navigate the audio functions associated with guest presentation activities.
- E-Kids students and their School-Based Support Person felt that the 'Guest Presenter' was an exciting event which motivated students and once again provided a way in which to bridge the geographical isolation.

vi) Project Co-ordinator

The initial role of the Project Co-ordinator was to develop the online classroom utilising the WebVC platform. With the higher than expected numbers of E-Kids students, the time and resources were stretched to the limit. The Project Manager of Country Education Project was allocated resources and time to support the role of the Project Coordinator. This included undertaking individual reviews of student contribution and participation, updating maths and science tasks and undertaking the evaluation. The feedback on this role received included;

- The role of Project Coordinator is essential for linking and liaising between the groups involved with *E-Kids Rural Express*.
- Much time was spent on managerial issues and minimised the Project Coordinator's availability to then further develop and maintain the online classroom.
- The number of enrolled students placed greater pressure on the role.

- The Project Coordinator needed more time to orientate the E-Kids and E-Mentors to the online classroom to eliminate confusion later on.
- Given the high usage of the program by E-Kid students outside of regular school hours, the Project Coordinator felt there was a need for monitoring of the Discussion Board facility over school holiday breaks to ensure the site remained 'secure' and postings were appropriate.
- School-based Support Personnel and E-Mentors both reported that receiving weekly newsletters kept them feeling both informed and supported in their roles.
- In future programs. The Project Coordinator needs to liaise regularly with staff who supervises the E-Mentors to ensure quality involvement and ongoing feedback occurs.

vii) Tasksetters

Two Tasksetters were involved in the development of student tasks for *E-Kids Rural Express project.* The tasks were diverse in both content and structure to accommodate the diversity of E-Kids learning styles. A list of tasks can be found in the Appendix.

They have been employed for up to five hours each week to write tasks for the *E-Kids Rural Express* online classroom.

Both Tasksetters have significant teaching experience and link closely with the Project Coordinator in the development of these tasks. Tasksetters have access to the online classroom for the purpose of evaluating task effectiveness and understanding student's interests and abilities.

The project was able to have access to an initial science and maths Tasksetter who provided a number of tasks for the E-kid students. However, on the leaving of this person, the replacing of this tasksetter was difficult.

The Project Co-ordinator and Project Manager provided a complimentary role in the development and provision of tasks for the E-Kid students. This included the development of tasks, accessing challenging activities from websites, and developing resources to link the learning task to the Victorian Essential Learning Standards framework. The Project Manager also provided a "backfill" role in the maths and science areas.

Specific feedback on the task setting role included:

- Both Tasksetters felt that when they initially embarked in their role of writing tasks for the students enrolled in E-Kids Rural Express, they were unsure of the aims and processes of the program, though had a broad understanding of the pedagogical needs the program aimed to address in rural and remote primary schools. Despite this, as the program has progressed, and they have had continuing correspondence with the Project Coordinator and Project Manager, together with being able to access the online classroom and read students' responses to activities, they have both reported having gained a more detailed understanding of the program, and its aims and objectives.

- Common to both Tasksetters, was their perception of E-*Kids Rural Express* having a "*Somewhat fragmented nature of the program, particularly in regard to the link between the mentors and task writers, not to mention actually knowing the abilities and interests of the students. A significant aspect of a teaching and learning pedagogy involves teaching 'people', rather than topics. Without some knowledge and understanding of the attitudes of the children, and the particular abilities of the mentors, the tasks are produced almost in isolation*".

viii)   Lou's Loopys

To compliment the set tasks and learning activities provided through the online classroom, the Country Education Project's Project Manager provided a small number of ongoing activities (Loopys) which provided an added opportunity for E-Kid students to undertake challenging learning.

The concept was to develop a learning activity that was fun and required creative thinking. As the E-Kid students' contributed to the Loopy, the learning activity would be added to weekly with more challenging learning provided.

The feedback from the E-kid students was very positive with large numbers of student involved in these activities. More specifically the feedback comments received included:

- High numbers of students were involved in Lou's Loopys and contributed work tasks on a regular basis.

- Students reported that Lou's Loopy's were an enjoyable activity and as a result seemed to spend more time and effort on them, even though they were not required tasks.

- The sequential and evolutionary approach to Lou's Loopys (that is the task was made more complicated by adding extra questions or problems) made it difficult for some students to participate as they may be focussing on initial tasks while the majority had moved onto other more complex tasks.

- The nature of the Lou's Loopy's seemed to enhance student's ability to explain and justify their thinking and processes and encouraged other students to do the same.

- E-Mentors and the School-Based Support Personnel reported using Lou's Loopy's in their own teaching practice/classroom. Many used them to broaden the curriculum provided for students in their own classroom.

Recommendations for Future

1. **That the Country Education Project Inc, continue to facilitate (and expand) the provision of learning through a Rural Education Online approach for students within rural and remote communities of Victoria.**

   As part of this online provision, the brokering model be further explored to provide expertise in other curriculum areas (E.g. maths, science, etc) to overcome the difficulty to recruit tasksetters, as experienced within the pilot project. Such an approach could also be utilized in developing learning programs in other areas such as the VCE.

   In relation to extension learning online:
   - the development of other curriculum areas be undertaken.
   - students from other year levels (especially Years 3, 4, 7 and 8) be involved in any future extension learning program.

2. **That resources be allocated by the various education sectors for a teacher position to support an ongoing Rural Extension Online project for rural and remote students.**

   This resourcing includes the allocation of a qualified teacher, resources for Task setters and finances to support operation expenses.

3. **Review other delivery platforms (E.g. Moodle), and explore the use of these platforms for the delivery of the program into the future to ensure that the best possible option for school students is utilised.**

   Through the review of this project, the development of Moodle in a number of schools within Victoria seems to be more student user friendly than the TAFE based WebVC platform. In addition, recent industry reviews of such platforms rate Moodle highly on a number of factors.

   In the development of such platforms, there needs to be links made with key statewide initiatives such as Ultranet.

4. **A specific information package is provided for the school-based contact person that details the project and their role within it.**

5. **That the E-Mentor role utilizing teacher trainees be further developed.**

6. **That the selection process and on-going monitoring of student involvement be further developed through the program's Information Booklets.**

7. **The development of an assessment strategy be developed utilizing current assessment policies and VELS.**

   Through the development of such a strategy, the future project will provide feedback for schools to allow E-Kid students learning outcomes to be included in their school report.

Task or Discussions Topics	Number of Visits (over a period of nine weeks)
Language	
Can you write the longest lipogram	40
Family Heirloom Moments	36
Catch the thief 1	57
Catch the thief 2	45
Catch the thief 3	39
Mouth-watering menu	28
Office door problem	12
Out the back of Bourke	8
Seven Towns	7
Sharing a Horse	11
Slip Sliding	4
The Bike Ride	11
The Chess Club	18
The Old Antique Shop	3
The Sheep Family	18
The Sunlander	2
Triangle and Star	14
Whakey Wordies	56
Me Stuff	135
Fairy Tale letters	78
Who am I?	86
Automotaic Powerpoint	64
Little red in the rescue	31
Maths	
Alegbra balance scales	16
Algebra balance scales – negative	11
Area of triangles	11
Blue Mountain damper	11
Catchmaths	21
Decimal and Fraction Game	49
Evacuation	9
Fools Gold	17
Maths 710	25
Mathsgraph	22
Mr Dial maths quiz	35
Mystery Number	13

Science and Technology	
Archimedes bath	53
Design and Build bridge	79
Design a rollercoaster	65
Eyeball challenge 1	73
Eyeball challenge 2	48
Rock bridge puzzle	16
Stone wheel puzzle	16
Wall tile puzzle	13
Getting a grip on robots	30
Going dotty	9
Incomplete block	14
Friction	33
Harvesting the rain game	31
Elements and compounds	13
Solids, liquids and gases	14
Types of Matter	13
Lou's Loopy's	
Quiz 1	98
Quiz 2	42
Quiz 3	27