

SKIPPING THE FORMALDEHYDE

Virtual frogs, videoconferencing teachers—and vital lessons

BY ANNA MULRINE

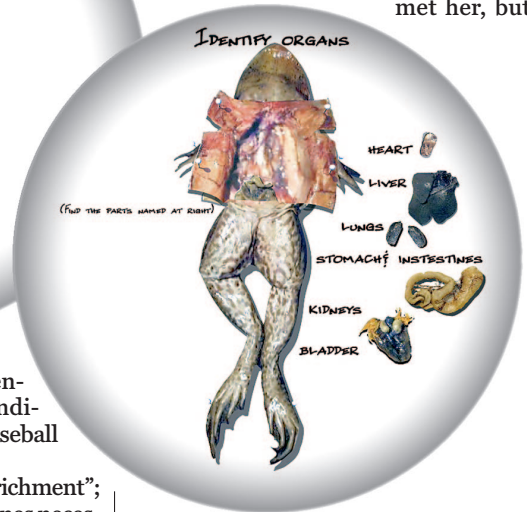
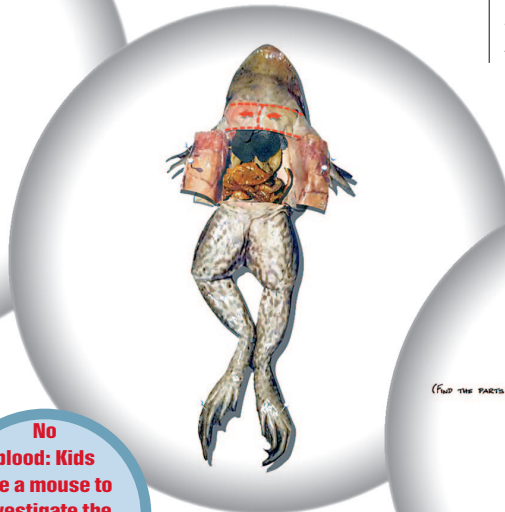
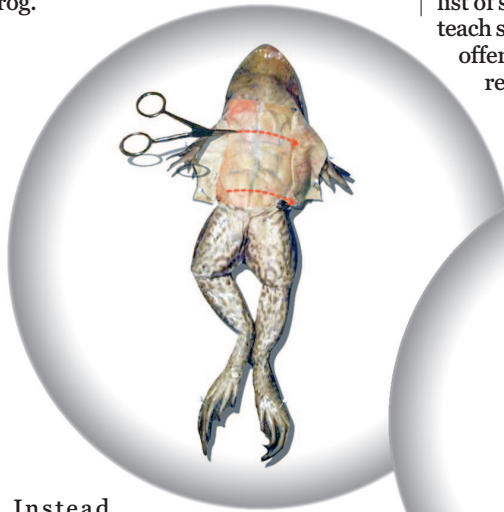
When Kay Stannard, a teacher at Calusa Elementary School in New Port Richey, Fla., decided to get her fifth graders excited about biology by giving them the chance to dissect a frog, she was afraid of some of them might be too grossed out. Chelsey Lindhorst, 10, had her concerns, too—but they didn't last long. "It was a little disgusting, but it was OK," she says. "Cause it wasn't a real frog."

there. So the district signed up with Tandberg, a company that connects teachers with students using high-tech videoconferencing. Recently, an instructor sent fourth graders in Howe a box of windup toys and from his Columbus, Ohio, classroom taught them how simple machines work by guiding them through the process of taking the toys apart.

Outside in. There's a chance, too, for students to travel far away—online. Each month participating school districts get a list of some 10 virtual field trips. "We can teach subjects that we wouldn't otherwise offer," Ford says. "This thing has really revolutionized our campus." His students have "visited" a marine biologist at the Georgia Institute of

ers and students from different schools, as he did earlier this month: "A principal calls me up and says, 'There's a new student at my school, and he needs anatomy and physiology.'" Bearden found him a teacher in Cisco, some 75 miles away from his school in Trent, later that day. Today, fully half of the districts in his large, rural school system have used virtual learning technology to bring their students a college course, and one third have used it to meet a high school requirement.

To be sure, the virtual world is not the same as the flesh-and-blood one. The National Science Teachers Association, for one, says that it's optimal for students to have hands-on dissection experience. But the real thing isn't always available. "I mean, if that's as close as I'm going to get, that's pretty good," says Kristen Burns, 11, who was pleased to watch and listen to Lynne Reid Banks, the author of *The Indian in the Cupboard*, through high-tech video equipment and to be able to ask some questions herself. "I'd rather have met her, but I



Instead, Stannard's students used a computer program, *Froguts*, which features photographs of a frog in various stages of dissection that kids can slice up with a virtual scalpel. "They loved the sound effects with the scissors cutting the skin, being able to put those pins in the flaps," says Stannard. So, presumably, do kids across the country, where *Froguts* reports that the dissection software was downloaded 130,000 times last month alone.

No blood: Kids use a mouse to investigate the organs of these dissected frogs.

Increasingly, educators are taking advantage of virtual learning—some to supplement lessons, others to provide vital courses in math, science, and the fine arts that students in small, poor, or rural schools might not have otherwise. In Howe, Okla., for example, more than 75 percent of children get free or reduced-price lunches, and the nearest zoo and museums are three hours away, says Lance Ford, the technology coordinator

Technology, the penguin exhibit at the Indianapolis Zoo, and the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Not all virtual learning is "enrichment"; some of it is more about bare-bones necessity. In Abilene, Texas, Tommy Bearden, distance-learning consultant for a region encompassing 13 counties and 43 school districts, recalls his recent search for a math teacher. He had two applicants: "One of them got fired from teaching in a prison. The other one was driving through from Oklahoma. She was wearing a pair of short shorts, a halter top, no bra, and a tattoo." He didn't hire either one. Instead, he now uses videoconferencing to link up teach-

thought it was really neat talking to her—it really gets your mind going," she says.

For his part, Ford sees the new tools as invaluable. "Not that I'm downing living here, but many of my students will probably never exit this county," he says. Given the shortage of resources and the tough work schedules of his students' parents, were it not for virtual learning and field trips, he adds, "some of my kids' horizons would never be broadened." ●

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