

Thinkquest

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INTRODUCTION

Thinkquest is a worldwide competition funded by the Oracle Foundation that focuses student efforts on project-based learning. Each year students around the world assemble in teams under the guidance of a coach to identify a project and build a Web site to present that topic.

In 1996, Oracle Foundation (<http://www.oraclefoundation.org/>) began an annual competition that by 2006 had grown to include 30,000 participants and an online library of resulting Web sites, the Thinkquest Library, and projects numbering more than 6,000 (Thinkquest, 2007a, para 2). The age of participating students spans ages 9-19. The team has to have a coach who then enrolls the team through the Thinkquest Web site in order that they are up to date with the requirements, submission process, deadlines, and evaluation criteria for the competition.

In addition, the student team has to select a topic to research and develop a Web site project within one of the educational categories. Reviewing the Thinkquest Web site, it is easy to see that while Thinkquest highlights student fun and competition, the student project and team work is intended to complement and extend academic study (Thinkquest, 2007b, para. Sidebar 1). This point is an important one because it makes the effort much more than an isolated after school program and creates the potential for teachers and coaches to integrate Thinkquest into advanced inquiry. At this time the broad educational categories include:

- Arts & Entertainment
- Books & Literature
- Business & Industry
- Computers & the Internet
- Geography & Travel
- Health & Safety
- History & Government

- Math
- Philosophy, Religion, & Mythology
- Science & Technology
- Social Sciences & Culture
- Sports & Recreation (<http://www.thinkquest.org/competition/categories.shtml>)

In creating their Web site projects for the Thinkquest competition, student work spans the range of research, writing, critical thinking, collaboration, presentation, design, and technical skills. More impressively, teams with students spanning young grades to high school, many perspectives, insights and technical experience provide a spectrum of variety that is rich because it is so broad. Rather than only seeing one age group represented, by looking at the entries, visitors to the competition and to the resulting Web sites can see such a myriad of experiences that help us appreciate that the world is seen in a very different ways among different digital natives than by adults and that we really should not try to overly generalize this generation. The competition has been generously supported and been able to award the top 10 teams in each age division laptop computers and the coach's school receives a cash award.

The pride among the teams as they demonstrate their work is the same as any person in the pride of their creations and accomplishments. And the top three teams compete in the annual Thinkquest Live event which celebrates student potential and accomplishment on a global scale. It is a rare time in which intellect is championed, often with music, banners, and streamers. The extent of the celebration can be glimpsed in this brief description.

In October 2006, the winning teams from the Thinkquest International 2006 competition convened in beautiful San Francisco, California, for four days of learning and fun-filled activities. A gala awards ceremony was the highlight of the week (Thinkquest, 2006, para 2.).

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND BENEFITS

Briefly summarizing some of the accomplishments and benefits of the Thinkquest array of efforts and resources, educators, parents, and students would most likely find the following characteristics prevalent:

- The international scope of the competition leads to a global awareness
- Guided and plentiful peer collaboration in an academic and fun pursuit
- High energy problem solving
- Maximizing student interest in the online world
- Empowering students to become, or increase their mastery of, online publishing
- Providing an opportunity for students to see their efforts alongside those of other age levels
- Structured training for the coaches
- Rubric-guided evaluation of the student projects
- Cultivation of 21st Century learning skills in an authentic activity
- Much needed integration of technical skills and creativity

CONCLUSION: BEYOND COMPETITION: COLLABORATION

In addition to the Thinkquest competitions, the Oracle Education Foundation also created Think.com, which they describe as an online community for learning. This development extends the work of Thinkquest far beyond the preparation for a contest and a competition day and instead offers a dynamic online collaboration tool and community that can be used for many purposes.

To foster this collaboration and extensive authentic writing experiences, this environment has included an effort to create a safe blogging environment for students and teachers which is password protected. The site includes several interactive tools to facilitate not only blogging but additional collaboration.

An additional feature is that the Oracle Education Foundation has been able to do this ad-free service for accredited primary and secondary schools. As of February 2007, thousands of schools around the world and in eight languages have used the environment and enrollment was still open (see http://www.think.com/en_us/apply/ for enrollment information).

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KEY TERMS

Thinkquest Library (<http://www.thinkquest.org/library>): Additional innovative learning resources for students of all ages on many different educational topics. This library could be a useful resource for instance in student and teacher research. As of February 2007, the Thinkquest Library included over 6,000 Web sites which were created by students from around the world as part of the Thinkquest competition.

Thinkquest Live (http://www.thinkquest.org/competition/tq_live.shtml): The annual global event honoring the competition's winning teams. Arriving from around the world, students and coaches celebrate their Thinkquest and academic achievements. In an unusual twist, some of the Thinkquest team members may meet at Thinkquest Live for the first time as they have worked on their online projects in geographically separated locations during the competition.

Thinkquest Winners' Page from 2006 (<http://www.thinkquest.org/aug05may06/>): Each year the Thinkquest competition has a Winners' Page published in order to celebrate the work of the students which have been rated the highest in the competition. This site provides an online portfolio of these authentic representations of their research, creativity, and collaborations.

Think.com (http://www.think.com/en_us/): Think.com is an online collaboration site where educators can select a topic and then have students and others from around the globe engage in discussing and exploring it together.

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