

# Learning Circles and the M-Bone

Early feedback on our tenth anniversary issue (ET41, Jan 95) includes a note from Robin Poppeldorff of the *Reporter*, an Italian EFL newspaper, saying: 'Congratulations on publishing one of the most interesting articles we've read yet concerning Internet and ESOL in last month's E.T.'

Others have also commented favourably on John Cumming's article 'Internet and the English language', but Robin Poppeldorff adds: 'We're also trying to keep up/get involved and have recently published a book dealing with teacher Mark Irvine's experience using E-mail and participating in AT&T Learning Circles.' Enclosed with the note was a copy of Irvine's *Write around the World* (*Reporter* and AT&T, 1994, Lire 30,000, £12.50).

AT&T sends would-be members of a Learning Circle a package containing an introductory explanatory letter and a curriculum guide for teachers regarding ways in which 'telecomputing' can serve as a learning tool, with groups of, say, Italian students of English working with groups in the US and maybe Malaysia – a vast advance on writing to a solitary foreign pen pal by 'snailmail'. Language teachers often talk about the value of 'authentic materials' in stimulating students. It is hard to imagine anything more authentic and immediate than this.

The *Reporter* project is one of many digital developments about which news now reaches *ET* almost every day. Another is the M-Bone ('multicast backbone') through which groups of computers can broadcast text, audio, and video interactively – a process called *multicasting*. Quoted by the *New York Times Service* in February this year, Steve Deering of Xerox in Palo Alto, California, said that the M-bone could become 'a sort of global video telephone system that allows groups of people – not just individuals – to share voice, data and images over the Internet'.

Scientists already use it to monitor video and data signals from robot submarines on the ocean floor, and 'medical students in Britain and Sweden can watch as a surgeon in San Francisco performs an unusual operation, asking the doctor questions as the procedure takes place'. No prizes for guessing the usual language for such questions.

Tom McArthur

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