When I first walked into my new classroom, I noticed something very odd: There were no windows. This, I thought, is not going to be fun. But my classes turned that liability into an adventurous global project that has touched thousands of lives.

I teach international relations in a public high school on the east side of San Jose, California. To understand how countries relate, students must understand how people relate, and the first step in getting along is seeing the world through the eyes of others. With that principle in mind, a project was born: Outside My Window.

My students decided to make a virtual window consisting of photographs taken through the real windows of other people. We hoped these images would come from all over the world, giving distant people a chance to connect and create understanding. There were many challenges, however. We had to build a Web site that captured the idea and provided a way to post submitted images. We had to promote the idea to people overseas. We had to excite other schools. Plus, I had to prepare and teach a class every day.

The solution was to allow the students to organize their own nonprofit “company.” They elected an executive team and then worked together. Also, each student sent an email to at least five people to solicit participation in the project and asked each one of them to forward the email to others. We designed and built the Web site using an online toolset available at www.godaddy.com, and we contacted international organizations.

It took months, but the photos came in. We now have more than 100 from all over the world, and more than 3,000 people have visited the site. We use a wireless network to download the photos (see how to set one up on page 20) and a color printer to create the images, which we post on our walls. Some photos are haunting, like the one taken at a concentration camp in Poland. Some are artful and colorful. Others are funny, like the one from Maine of a large bug on a window. Many simply show plain views from people’s windows, because that’s what life mostly is—plain.

Through this activity, we learned what works and what doesn’t. For instance, projects must be bounded by reasonable time frames. Also, open-ended ideas can make group participation difficult. It has nevertheless been a rewarding experience. Students discovered the power of the Internet, and they learned about the difficulty of executing good ideas. They also figured out that, in a small way, they can touch the world. All from a room with no windows.

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How-to

Stage 1: Send photos
1. Take photos (preferably digital) and send them to our Web site: www.outsidemywindow.org. If you have a large number of images, burn them to a CD and send it to:
Mark Gross, Evergreen Valley High School, 3300 Quimby Road, San Jose, CA 95148
2. Be sure to send the email address of the person who submitted the photo, if available.

Stage 2: Post message to forum
1. Students may write a paragraph or two describing the view from their window and the issues faced by the people around them. Teachers should seed this problem by providing a template of topics that will help pull social issues and problems out into the open.
2. Students post those as email to the Outside My Window forum: outsidemywindow@yahooGroups.com.

Stage 3: Find someone to talk with
1. Have your students join the forum at www.groups.yahoo.com/group/outsidemywindow.
2. Students can find other members and write to them to discuss what life is like where they live and to find issues and interests they share.

Stage 4: Build your own window
1. Students email friends and family promoting Outside My Window and requesting photos.
2. Build a window frame. We built one by having each student draw a self-portrait on a presized sheet of paper and then taping them all together. You can see the frame on this site on the Our Classroom page.
3. Collect photos, assemble into a collage, and put inside the frame.
4. Email us a picture of your window: grossm@esuhsd.org.

Related projects for students
• Write about their experience participating in the project.
• “Adopt” other countries, then research them and develop a compare-and-contrast poster and essay.
• Make a documentary film about life in a country where other project participants live.
• Hold a multicultural day during which they re-create some aspect of life elsewhere.
• Select a significant social problem worldwide and develop a project to try to affect it.