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Biology students study computer aliens

By Fiona Soltes

STAFF WRITER

If E.T.'s spaceship had crashed in Aggie-land instead of Elliot's backyard, it's possible Texas A&M biology students could have used computers to cure his ills.

Computers were once thought to be the teaching tool of the future. But now that they've become commonplace, educators are looking at another method of teaching — examining extra-terrestrials in biology class.

Dr. C.O. "Pat" Patterson, a Texas A&M biology professor, and Dr. Robert Kosinski of Clemson University have developed software "scenarios," including one in which students examine extra-terrestrials, to teach students to focus on learning processes rather than just memorizing them.

The "Alien" scenario turns the student into a world-famous physiologist asked by NASA to analyze an extra-terrestrial that came to earth in a space probe.

All the student knows is that the alien is alive and that if killed, interplanetary war may be declared.

The student must perform several experiments to analyze the alien.

"Some of the experiments offered will be useful and help you find the answers you're looking for," Patterson said. "Some will be useless, not adding to your information but not harmful to the alien. And others offered will not only be useless, but also dangerous."

Patterson said because the subject is completely fictitious, the student merely can't look up the answer and memorize it.

"The scenario helps students focus on how to go about finding the answers to problems," he said.

"The focus is on techniques: setting up, conducting the experiment, analysis and reaching conclusions. It's how to get the answer, not what the answer is."

The scenario was designed about five years ago for use in freshman biology classes but has become applicable in other settings, Patterson said.

He and Kosinski are showing the program to high school teachers in Texas and South Carolina in hopes that the idea will catch on. Patterson said it also has been shown to a publisher for national distribution.

"From what I've observed, it's something the students really enjoy," he said. "It's something like a game and involves competition with the other members of the class. It requires thought and interaction."

However, Patterson said there are disadvantages to the program.

"It is expensive," he said. "You must have a computer, and you really can't have more than a few students working at a terminal at a time. Essentially, you'd need many computers for an entire lab class."

Patterson said the program can be used with either an Apple IIe or IBM computer.

"Another disadvantage is that it could get carried too far," he said. "We don't want to teach biology second-hand or have the students learn only by the computer. The program should not replace the traditional lab,

but they do give us the chance to do things not possible before because of money or time limitations."

Other scenarios also have been developed by Patterson and Kosinski, all through a program sponsored by the National Science Foundation.

One such program, called "Seedling," lets the student decide how to allocate nutrients picked up through the photosynthesis of a plant.

Facing growing seasons in either El Paso, Charleston, S.C., or San Juan, Puerto Rico, the plant must choose between adding leaves, increasing leaf surface area, increasing stem height, increasing stem diameter or increasing root length to ensure maximum growth potential.

Patterson said Kosinski is working on another scenario called "Fish Farm," concerning managing the water temperature, food amount and other variables of a fish hatchery.

Smoke fills skyscraper in Houston

HOUSTON (AP) — An explosion and fire ripped through the fourth floor of a downtown skyscraper Tuesday afternoon, spreading smoke throughout the 34-story tower and forcing the evacuation of office workers, authorities said.

There were no injuries, but damage to the floor at One Allen Center appeared to have been severe, Houston Fire Chief Robert L. Clayton said.

The fire erupted around 3 p.m. in an area where construction crews were removing asbestos from the building, Clayton said. Smoke rose up stairwells and elevator shafts to the uppermost floors.

More than 90 firefighters responded to the blaze, which was invisible from the icy streets where passers-by and evacuees stood surrounded by rows of fire trucks and ambulances.

There were initial reports that some office workers were overcome by smoke and trapped in an upper stairwell, but fire department spokesman Mike Warnke said firefighters searched the entire building and found none.

Attorney Bob Blend said he and others in his office smelled smoke before an alarm was sounded.

"When we smelled the smoke I went out in the hall and the farther I walked the stronger the smell," said Blend, whose office is on the top floor. "When I opened the fire (stair) door, the smoke just billowed into the hall."

Warnke said an explosion of unknown size apparently sparked the blaze but that the exact cause was not yet known. The fire was controlled within 30 minutes, he said.

"Some of the walls were blown out, but we haven't been able to tell yet just how bad the damage is," Warnke said.

Authorities said they would look into reports that office workers were unable to activate the building's fire alarm.

Lawyer faces jail, fine for shooting rare crane

CORPUS CHRISTI (AP) — A Houston attorney who fatally wounded one of the world's few remaining whooping cranes last month was indicted on a charge of violating the Endangered Species Act.

Mario Max Yzaguirre, 28, was indicted by a federal grand jury in Corpus Christi last week. If convicted, he faces a maximum of a year in jail and a \$100,000 fine. He is to be arraigned Feb. 17.

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department officials have said the department also will seek \$11,000 in restitution from Yzaguirre, a lawyer with the law firm of Vinson & Elkins.

Yzaguirre was out of his office Tuesday, his secretary said, and could not be immediately reached for comment by the Associated Press.

At the time of the killing, however, Yzaguirre, who is the son of

Brownsville pharmacist Mario Yzaguirre, a member of the University of Texas board of regents, said he mistook the whooping crane for a snow goose. The whooper was flying through heavy fog with her mate, he said.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials also have said the shooting appeared to be a mistake by Yzaguirre. A federal official, however, said Yzaguirre allegedly buried the bird but later turned it over to authorities.

Environmentalists said the whooper, killed near Aransas National Wildlife Refuge north of Corpus Christi, was unusual because it was only 4 years but had already had a chick, while most female whoopers first have chicks at age 5.

About 200 whooping cranes exist today, and about 130 of them roost each winter along the Texas Gulf Coast.

Constituents criticize Wright for handling of pay raise bill

FORT WORTH (AP) — While Speaker of the House Jim Wright rapped his gavel for a vote on the proposed congressional pay raise in Washington, his constituents in Texas sounded off against the man they helped put in office.

Calls by Fort Worth residents to a KLIF-AM radio talk show Tuesday were highly critical of Wright's handling of the proposed wage increase. The callers were not required to identify themselves, and few did.

"I'm very disgusted in Jim Wright," said one caller. "I really think he's about the biggest crook in Texas. I'm going to work as hard as I can to get him out of office."

Another caller told the listeners, "If there's someone running against him (Wright) who has some decent qualifications, there's no doubt that I would probably think twice about voting for Jim Wright."

Other respondents were dis-

turbed that Wright was not explaining his position to them.

"I really feel that Jim Wright's opinion of my opinion doesn't amount to a bucket of warm spit," a caller said. "I wrote him; I sent him a tea bag; I called his office. And, so far, I've gotten two copies of the same letter saying he wasn't going to do anything."

One caller was philosophical about Wright's position: "I think he typifies the problem with Congress right now."

Dissatisfaction with the information out of Wright's home office in Texas was another caller's gripe. A spokesman for the office said all inquiries are routinely routed to the speaker's office in Washington.

Calls to Wright's Washington office by the Associated Press were not immediately returned.

Wright's position as speaker has

changed his view of his constituents, one caller said.

"I feel like that since he's been speaker of the house, he's almost like a power monger," a caller said. "I don't think he represents Fort Worth any more. I voted for him in 1980. But that's when I was still pretty politically ignorant."

Wright told the Fort Worth Star Telegram on Jan. 26 that he expected to be ridiculed for some of his decisions.

"The speaker is supposed to take some heat," he was quoted as saying. "If you're a leader in an institution you're expected to be a lightning rod. . . . I'm doing the best I can to put it in perspective. Sometimes that is difficult for a congressional leader."

Letters to the Star Telegram's opinion-editorial page over the past few days have said Wright has lost sight of what his job is

Study advertisement for Irritable Bowel Syndrome Study. \$100 incentive for those chosen to participate.

Study advertisement for Asthma Study. \$200 incentive for those chosen to participate.

Study advertisement for Sore Throat/Strep Throat Study. \$100 incentive for those chosen to participate.

Study advertisement for Cedar/Winter Allergy Study. \$100-\$200 incentive for those chosen to participate.

Study advertisement for Acute Bronchitis/Pneumonia. \$100 incentive for those who qualify.

Study advertisement for Pediatric Sore Throat Study. \$50 incentive for those who qualify.

Study advertisement for High Blood Pressure Study. \$300 incentive for those chosen to participate.

Study advertisement for Pain Study. Monetary incentive for those chosen to participate.

Call Paul Research International 776-0400

Reba McEntire concert advertisement for Friday - February 10th at G. Rollie White Coliseum. Tickets still available.

Swensen's Big Meal Deal advertisement. 1/3 lb. hamburger with fries, large soft drink, and super sundae for \$3.99 with coupon.

Valentine Love Lines advertisement. Place your ad by coming by the English Annex. Deadline Thursday, Feb. 9, 1989, 12 noon.