

education 2000

lessons for success

SECOND IN A SERIES

'The Internet is a contemporary talking drum. Yet Black people have been relatively slow to embrace this new resource. It's up to us to use this new educational technology wisely.'

By Henry Louis Gates, Jr.



New Knowledge, New Power

IN THE DAYS OF SLAVERY, when Black people were forbidden to read and write, some of our ancestors risked punishment and even death to acquire literacy. They knew that mastering the written word gave them the power to communicate. They saw gaining this power as a crucial step on the road to freedom.

At the turn of the millennium, new technologies and new media have expanded the concept of literacy, but the idea remains the same: Since ancient times, Africans have

used the talking drum to share information and relay messages between villages; now the Internet has become a contemporary talking drum, allowing Black people to communicate with one another, as well as with anyone else, throughout the global village.

Yet Black people have been relatively slow to embrace this new resource. A recent study by the Project 2000 Center at Vanderbilt University shows that White households are more likely to

bridged, it will largely depend on our use of existing technology. Plugging in through virtual communities on the Internet is an important way to fill gaps in knowledge.

Despite the success of broadly focused Web communities such as Black Voices.com, Net Noir and Afro Net, until recently few investors have been willing to fund sites appealing to our PC-scarce community. A notable exception is Black Entertainment Television's soon-to-be-launched portal, backed with \$35 million from AT&T's Liberty Media unit, News Corp., USA Networks and Microsoft. Still there's a continuing need for more *educational* content with a Black perspective—which is why my colleagues, Professor Kwame Anthony Appiah and Professor Harry M. Lasker, III, and I have created *Africana.com*, a Web site for the global Black community.

By providing authoritative content on *Africana* history and culture and the capacity for dialogue about it, we have established a learning environment to draw more of us to cyberspace. This site offers Black history, daily news updates,

are given free copies of the *Encarta Africana* 2000 CD-ROM or the newly published *Africana* print encyclopedia.

Last February, African-American investment manager Alphonse Fletcher, Jr., chairman and CEO of Fletcher Asset Management, Inc., in New York City, observed Black History Month by becoming one of our lead Adopt-a-School donors. His contribution is making it possible for more than 500 New York City public schools to receive copies of the *Encarta Africana*. By the end of 1999, eight other major gifts from corporate, foundation and individual sources had funded free on-line programs for public schools in Connecticut and Massachusetts; Atlanta; Chicago; Detroit; Newark, New Jersey; Minneapolis; Cleveland and San Francisco.

You, too, can nominate a school for the Adopt-a-School program at www.africana.com. Every one of our children needs to learn about the glories of ancient Africa, the vitality of African America, the rich crosscurrents among diasporic peoples in the Caribbean, Latin America and around the world

BACK TALK