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Building School Culture

Global Currents

International Projects Bring Distant Cultures Within Reach

Terrey Hatcher Quindlen

Michelle Speight, an elementary teacher in Alberta, Canada, has found that there are no boundaries when it comes to finding innovative ways to help children learn. She has seen struggling students blossom when they get involved in international collaborations.

Speight points to one success story in particular. A 2nd grade student—"Dave"—came from a troubled home. "He couldn't read. He couldn't recognize basic letters. He had no [learning] support at home," Speight recalls. Still, she noticed that he came to school with a smile and was a bright student.

When Speight's class at Parkdale School in Calgary partnered with an urban Chicago class to work on an Internet project called Museum Connections, Dave was paired with a student who had similar family and literacy challenges. Although they lived in different countries, Speight notes, "they had so much in common."

The two classes began sharing information about their community museums via e-mail and Web sites (http://projects.cbe.ab.ca/ict/2learn/mmspeight/museumconnections/index.htm). Initially, Dave dictated e-mail messages, and his teacher typed and sent them to his partner in Chicago. Corresponding with his long-distance friend gave Dave an incentive to learn to write, Speight says. He gradually began typing a few words. When he finally completed a message on his own, he proudly added a note that said, "Dave typed this one himself."

Speight noticed that the e-mail friendship helped Dave feel connected and motivated. As the year progressed, "he really wanted to learn to read," she explains, "and it was all because of this project."

Building a Global Community

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Other teachers around the world are helping students gain a deeper understanding of their curriculum and other cultures when they collaborate over the Internet by creating Web sites, participating in e-mail exchanges, and even holding teleconferences.

"These tools can break down the walls of our classrooms and open new windows for our kids," says Bill Belsey, coordinator of Canada's SchoolNet Network of Innovative Schools. Belsey fosters connections among the network's more than 100 member schools that use technology in imaginative ways to improve learning.

By using project-based learning over the Internet, "we can engage kids with issues that matter to them," Belsey says. "Kids find a common language, whether they are talking about something as horrific as the September 11 terrorist attacks or West Nile virus, circumpolar pollution, or AIDS."

Belsey also coordinates the International Education and Resource Network (iEARN) in Canada. In addition to promoting global student collaborations, iEARN offers professional development for teachers who want to facilitate collaborative Internet projects. Training can help with the continuing learning curve, Belsey notes, because "technology changes every minute of every day."

Tapping a Teacher's Passion

Both Belsey and Speight emphasize that technical skill is not a prerequisite to global collaborations. What is key, however, is teacher enthusiasm. "When teachers can reawaken the passion that is inside of them, then what happens in classrooms is electric," Belsey says.

Speight gained expertise in creating a virtual museum Web site by following e-mail advice from another teacher and, in turn, coaching her students. The result, complete with 360-degree views of artifacts, can be seen on the Web at http://projects.cbe.ab.ca/ict/2learn/mmspeight/virtualmuseum/index.htm.

As a lead teacher for Alberta's Telus 2Learn program, Speight consults with colleagues who are beginning to explore collaborative telecommunications projects. The 2Learn program is funded through the SchoolNet GrassRoots Program, a technology education initiative sponsored by Canada's federal and provincial governments along with corporate partners.

With telecommunications collaborations, Speight says, the planning always begins with the curriculum and the teachers' project goals. Because administrators, other teachers, and parents tend to be skeptical about the time invested in these projects, "you have to be accountable," she advises.

Through experience, Speight has learned that differing expectations can cause the school partnerships to fizzle. When connecting with unknown colleagues, teachers have to expect their partners to have very different teaching styles and talents, she notes.

Getting Acquainted

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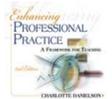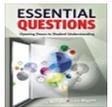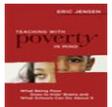
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Before starting the classroom interactions, partner teachers should spend time developing a good working relationship, says Kiyomi Hutchings, executive director of Teachers International Exchange in Palo Alto, Calif. Her organization helps connect teachers in Japan and the United States so they can share technological expertise.

Students should also spend time getting to know each other before the project work begins, Hutchings advises. "Relationship building and trust building are very important," she says. Otherwise, partner schools sometimes stop corresponding when faced with technical problems.

Another potential pitfall is lack of planning, Hutchings says. Partner teachers need to dedicate time to sharing their visions and objectives and setting schedules in advance.

Even with careful collaboration, challenges can arise. Language, for instance, can be a particularly strong barrier to global project-based learning. Teachers should be patient, Hutchings advises, when a partner must take time to translate student work from one language to another.

For teacher Barbara Dieu, the translation challenge fits in neatly with class assignments. Dieu teaches English as a second language at Lycée Pasteur, a French-Brazilian secondary school in São Paulo, Brazil.

Four years ago, Dieu and her students began participating in a global telecommunications project called This Is Our Time. Sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO, the project encourages students to examine and discuss world issues. The project encompasses a whirlwind of international educational activities—including quizzes, online discussion forums, and videoconferences—during a 24-hour period each November. Classes also can pair up and correspond over several months.

Practical Motivations

Dieu soon realized that the Time project's Spanish language site for Latin America didn't quite meet her school's needs. So she asked her students to translate the project material from English to French as part of their class assignments. Her students were thrilled when project officials used the material on the French version of the Time site and gave them credit. Dieu later translated the material into Portuguese to share with other Brazilian students.

In terms of language study, the Time activities have given Dieu's students an incentive to learn more vocabulary words. "For me, as a language teacher, it is easy to integrate these projects into the curriculum," Dieu explains. "It's much easier to discuss things that are relevant to the students."

In relation to culture, the international correspondence has opened the Brazilian students' eyes to

stereotypes about them. For example, Dieu recalls how shocked her students were when peers from another country assumed they lived in a jungle. In fact, São Paulo is one of the world's most populated cities, with about 17 million people. "How can they think we live in a jungle," her students asked, "when we live in such a big city?"

Comparing Notes

Understanding such differences is important for students' intellectual growth, says Mika Vanhanen, who heads an international network of schools called Environment Online, or ENO. The ENO project, based in Lehmo, Finland, focuses not only on ecology but also on the cultural and social landscapes of communities.

For each ENO theme—such as "The Way We Live: Environment and Health"—students first collect data from their local environments and then compare notes over the Internet. They discuss ways they might change their actions to improve the environment. Students and teachers also involve members of the community, by interviewing experts or taking surveys. "The activities extend the learning outside the school—so the benefit is not only for the classroom and the school but for the community as well," Vanhanen notes.

ENO teachers also have their own network, and they conduct online chat sessions to exchange information about curriculum, school schedules, salaries, and holidays. Through these discussions, Vanhanen says, ENO educators "have learned a lot about teaching in other countries."

Building Confidence

In addition to serving curriculum goals, many educators say these types of projects foster students' self-confidence and maturity. "They come out of their shells a bit. They get more autonomous," Dieu says, and they learn to listen courteously to others' views.

By communicating with kids in other countries, "students can gain more appreciation for diversity—for different ways of thinking and different values," Hutchings says.

These projects help students build a web of local and international connections, says Eliane Metni, a coordinator and curriculum developer for iEARN Lebanon in Kfarhabab. "They express their feelings and explore possible solutions together," she notes.

Recently, Metni has fostered student participation in YouthCaN, a youth-run organization that uses technology to inspire people to improve the environment. It was wonderful to see students from Lebanon and New York City working together to plan a YouthCaN workshop for the iEARN annual conference in Japan, she says. When these students go into the working world, Metni notes, "those interpersonal, international relationships can develop into strong, long-term professional relationships.

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Educators agree that these partnerships build important skills for the future. Years ago, students could manage without being too concerned about events in other countries, Belsey says. "Now," he says, "what happens in other parts of the world can have tsunami-like effects. Knowing your 'burb is not enough."

Through successful telecommunications collaborations, innovative educators like Belsey are helping prepare today's students to ride the waves of global change.

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