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Title: Art of Collaboration: Awesome Tools and Proven Strategies

Presented by Yvonne Marie Andres, Global SchoolNet Foundation

Online collaboration supports active learners, who construct knowledge, rather than passively absorb it. This mixed media session will introduce highly effective online collaborative tools, content and implementation strategies.

Schools were once information-rich destinations where children were provided learning experiences not available to them outside of the school building. In contrast, today's classrooms are often the opposite, as most contemporary students spend their non-school hours engaged in continuous, information drenched, multi-media experiences, via television, their home computers, and in video arcades. As a result, teachers are increasingly challenged to devise ways to make learning within the school building interesting and relevant for students. The use of computers seems to offer one solution. Reports indicate that nearly all U.S. children have access to computers at school and over two-thirds have access at home (Packard Foundation report, 2001). Yet, although there is a general consensus among parents, teachers, and policymakers that children need to become competent computer users to be prepared for life and work in the twenty-first century, there is little agreement over the role and best use of those computers to support student achievement. In an era that has been labeled the electronic information age, the Internet has the capability to greatly enhance both learning and teaching. It is undeniable that computers connected to the Internet provide students with an extensive selection of information resources. However, when teachers consider the educational value of the Internet, they often overlook the benefits of the "people" resources, or more specifically, the benefits of online collaborative learning.

Research indicates that when a student is engaged in a collaborative learning project, frequently the students' level of tolerance and acceptance of other people's viewpoints is increased, a skill which can be beneficial in real-life situations where compromises are often required. Joint database exploration, sharing workspaces and supporting reflective communication enable individuals to share cognitively with other individuals. Students often form close friendships with their distant teammates, and many indicate that for that reason they look forward to coming to class. On an academic level, Johnson and Johnson's research indicates that "cooperative learning experiences promote higher achievement than do competitive and individualistic experiences" (1985, p. 104).

Benefits of Online Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning, sometimes called "group learning" or "shared learning" takes advantage of learning as a social process. Students are frequently more motivated to work, when there is an audience beyond that of the teacher. Additional benefits of collaborative learning are many. Students can access interesting source data, experience virtual travel, and connect with other students and subject experts to study and learn together.

Students frequently improve their reading, writing, and data management skills. Online collaborative learning provide effective opportunities for students to practice learning new languages, by connecting non-native speakers with native speakers. Web-based collaboration often presents a positive public forum for showcasing student work for parents and the community.

Geography, history, politics and world cultures become more relevant to students as they communicate directly with other students from distant locations. Learning is more meaningful when, for example, students who are studying volcanoes can communicate directly with children living at the foot of Mount Kilauea in Hawaii and learn first hand about flowing lava, spewing ashes, and seismic activity. When they can see how the subject matter affects their everyday lives, they're eager to contribute. In Southern California and Kobe, Japan, middle students learn about earthquake preparedness by sharing experiences through Internet videoconferencing. High school students receive first-hand accounts of life in a besieged Bosnian town and anxiously hope for resolution. Elementary school students raise awareness about environmental issues by tracking key data on an international scale. 450 schools from 38 countries contribute two lines of poetry about peace, to the United Nations, creating the world's largest peace poem and establishing a sense of belonging to a common humanity.

Newsday is an example of an interdisciplinary project that results in a newspaper produced by students. Working as reporters, students throughout the world submit feature articles to the Newsday news wire. Team members collaborate and work as editors, graphic artists, and publishers to produce the paper together. Since the newspaper is global, students also gain a broad knowledge and understanding of current events and international issues.

Community-oriented learning can mobilize the energy, commitment, and idealism of young people, while teaching them leadership skills and personal responsibility. These "service-learning" collaborative projects provide an opportunity for students to apply newly learned skills to real

world situations, thus increasing retention. And, reciprocally, the community benefits from collaborative projects that increase pride in the community, help reduce vandalism, discourage graffiti, bullying, and school violence, or provide food, clothing and assistance for the needy, sick and elderly. A great example of a community service collaborative project is the Brother Benno and Kiwanis of San Diego Second-hand Sock Drive.

Students in a collaborative learning environment are active learners, who construct knowledge, rather than passively absorb it. Effective collaboration requires coordinated scheduling, common communication tools and mutually accepted goals and objectives. Well-designed online collaborative learning projects provide students with unique and highly motivating learning experiences that would not be available to them within the traditional classroom walls.

Challenges of Online Collaborative Learning

Effective collaboration requires coordinated scheduling, common communication tools and mutually accepted goals and objectives. The most cited challenges associated with online collaborative learning were that they required additional time and that they often did not have administrative support. Also perceived as obstacles were not having skills to manage the relationships with partner classes, difficulty in managing the data produced by the project, and individual assessment of student achievement.

The best way to overcome these challenges is to participate in one of the classic, "classroom-tested" projects that have been around for a long time, like GeoGame, Global Grocery List, Travel Buddies, Noon Observation, or Westward Ho! These projects, some of which have been running for more than a decade, have experienced facilitators, content exemplars, assessment models and a proven track record of success.

An additional obstacle to fully implementing this technology is a hesitation on the part of teachers and administrators to get involved in a form of communications that has not been traditionally part of the educational system.

Unfortunately, at the present time, although classroom access to the Internet has increased, it seems that most teachers are not yet taking advantage of the Internet's collaborative learning capabilities.

To learn more about these and other online collaborative learning projects and tools visit www.globalschoolnet.org

Author Bio

Yvonne Marie Andres is Executive Director of the (not-for-profit) Global SchoolNet Foundation. An educator for nearly two decades, Andres has taught pre-school through university and is dedicated to discovering, demonstrating, and documenting the power of Internet-based collaborative learning. She is co-founder of the Global Schoolhouse producing the Global Schoolhouse website, the International Schools CyberFair program, and has provided leadership at conferences and workshops throughout the U.S., Canada, Asia, Europe, Australia, South America and Africa. Ms. Andres was most recently named one of the 25 most influential people, worldwide, in education technology.

Global SchoolNet Foundation

Global SchoolNet, a developer of online content since 1984, partners with schools, institutes of higher learning, communities, organizations and businesses to provide collaborative learning activities that prepare students for the workforce and help them to become responsible global citizens. The Global SchoolNet Foundation helps educators to develop basic and advanced literacy, communication and research skills among their students through online, project-based learning activities and programs. Global SchoolNet is a member supported, 501(c)(3) not-for-profit education organization.