

What Benefits Occur When Schools Engage in KeyPal Exchanges?

By Diane DeMott Painter, Ph.D.

I read with great interest Judi Harris' article, "Wherefore Art Thou, Telecollaboration" published in ISTE's March 2002 Learning and Leading with Technology Journal. As the technology coordinator at The University of Texas-Austin, Harris has researched the use of computers in American schools and reports that more than 95% of U.S. Schools are now connected to the Internet and that 80% of the classrooms have Internet access. However, eighty-four percent of U.S. teachers surveyed in 2001 agreed that Internet access can improve the quality of education; and yet, only 33% said that the use of online resources is well integrated into learning and teaching in the classroom (NetDay, 2001; CNN, 2001).

Harris identifies 18 different types of telecollaborative activities, divided into three categories that can be used to enhance the quality of education: interpersonal exchanges, information collection and analysis, and problem solving. But most educators are not taking advantage of the Internet to provide telecollaborative experiences. Harris asks the question, "What's the problem?" According to the survey data, 78% of the teachers indicate that "lack of time" is the single most important reason for not using the Internet more in the classrooms.

The reason for my personal interest in her article stems from my own experiences with telecollaborative projects. Since 1990 I have participated in several telecollaborative projects with students at three different elementary schools in Fairfax County, Virginia. These three projects were designed to promote cultural and environmental understandings about life both here in the United States and in other parts of the world. For the most part, the projects have been successful, lasting most of a school year and bringing students a tremendous gain in knowledge. One project linked sixth grade students with Grade Eight students at Zakladni Skola Omska School in Prague, Czechoslovakia. American sixth graders composed messages asking about music, dress, and other typical adolescent interests. The Czech students asked questions about our U.S. government and they also expressed concerns about their country's political problems, mostly worried about the downfall of their communist government and the unrest among the different ethnic groups. Many students predicted in their e-mail messages the uprisings that did indeed occur later in Czechoslovakia. This project earned an award from the Freedom's Light Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded to promote the principles of freedom and democracy throughout Eastern and Central Europe.

The VSTE Journal is published by the Virginia Society for Technology in Education. Permission is granted to copy and distribute single articles from this publication for non-profit use with copyright notice.

Contents copyright © 2002, VSTE. All rights reserved.

KeyPal Exchanges, continued

Another project linked my fourth grade students with a private Catholic high school in Melbourne, Australia. The fourth grade students compared and contrasted Australian geography, climate, language, animal life, government, and traditions with what they were studying about Virginia. In exchange, the fourth grade students helped the Australian students conduct research for their environmental science class. The high school students needed to research the types of household products that were produced in the U.S. that involved testing the products on animals. The fourth graders' research of products they found in their homes provided firsthand information- that is, primary research data- for the Australian students to use in their environmental science reports. The fourth graders also became aware of how animals are often used in industrial experiments. This sparked some interesting discussions about animal rights. We called this telecommunications project "Online to Australia", and the Commonwealth of Virginia's Department of Education recognized it as an exemplary telecommunications project in June 1992.

I have had some unsuccessful attempts to establish meaningful telecommunications projects, however. In each of these cases, one or two exchanges were made but interest on the part of our partner schools waned half way through the year. For example, three years ago we tried to establish a telecommunications exchange between one fourth grade class in a school located in the southwestern part of Virginia with one of our fourth grade classes at my current school, Deer Park Elementary. The purpose of the exchange was to compare and contrast the economics, culture and geography of the rural, primarily agricultural and coal mining area of Southwestern Virginia with the highly developed commercial urban area of Northern Virginia. The southwestern school e-mailed Deer Park School halfway through the year saying it was too hard to schedule time for electronic mail exchanges. Apparently their students had only one computer they could use with an Internet connection and that connection was in the library. Therefore, the difficulty with accessibility became a major issue contributing to an early end to the project.

The connections for these projects were made via word of mouth. A professor from George Mason University helped establish the link with the school in Czechoslovakia. The Australian connection was made when I stumbled across a request to establish a link from the Australian teacher when she had posted a message on a listserv bulletin board. The link with the school in the southwestern part of the Virginia was made when I met the teacher at a Virginia Society for Technology in Education (VSTE) Conference.

KeyPal Project with England

In April 2001 we got another chance to initiate a telecollaborative project with a school in Europe. Ike Garrison, an administrator from the Oxfordshire School District near Oxford, England, visited Deer Park Elementary when touring schools within Fairfax County. Interested in exchanging curriculum ideas with our school, Mr. Garrison proposed a telecollaborative project that would involve grades K-6, and would focus on exchanging ideas and information that support the curriculum found in both our school and one school in the Oxfordshire School District. Mr. Garrison "matched" us with Northbourne Primary School in Didcot, England. Didcot is a small town not too far from Oxford, the home of Oxford University. Although funded by public taxes, Northbourne also has an affiliation with the Church of England.

KeyPal Exchanges, continued

This telecollaborative project began with a different twist when compared with my previous telecommunications experiences. I was invited to fly to England and visit with the staff and students of Northbourne School before beginning the project. Since English schools do not break for summer recess until the end of July, I was able to spend three nights and four days in Didcot, visiting Northbourne School and touring Oxford. I was hosted by the school's principal, Mrs. Kathleen Cook, and her husband, Dr. David Cook, a fellow at Oxford University. I found this "pre-visit" both exciting and helpful. I took pictures of the school, children at recess and in their classes and shared them with Deer Park School staff and students in September. While in England, I also stayed with some of my American friends assigned to the American Embassy in London and had the opportunity to be a tourist. I purchased educational materials written in England that we now use in our fifth grade social studies program on the Middle Ages such as books on castles, knights, the Crusades, English kings and queens.

In October 2001, the Northbourne "teaching" assistant principal, Ms. Heather Delaney, flew to Virginia and spent a week as a guest in my home, visiting Deer Park, its staff and the students. At that time we were able to formally outline our project objectives and the timeframe that we wanted to follow in order to accomplish those objectives. Ms. Delaney teaches a 5/6 combination class and she was able to bring back items from Virginia such as a wall map of our state, pictures about the American Civil War, state flag and images of historical sites around the Washington, D.C. area.

The Structure of the Project

We decided that our focus of the project would be to discover "What benefits occur when schools engage in KeyPal Exchanges?" The participants were chosen when volunteer Deer Park teachers from each grade level K-6 were matched with Northbourne teachers who teach similar age groups. Northbourne classes are multi-year (combination) classes but Deer Park classes consist of only one grade level. For example, Northbourne teacher, Mr. Dave Gibson, teaches the Year 5/6 class and his students are ages nine through eleven. His Deer Park KeyPal class was Mrs. Tyler-Smith's fifth grade class of students ages ten and eleven. In addition, the Deer Park librarian, music, physical education and art teachers also volunteered to work within the project, but they primarily corresponded with Ms. Delaney since Northbourne's classroom teachers teach the "arts" classes and she agreed to share the information with them.

After reviewing each school's curriculum, it was decided that partner classes would decide on their own reasons and objectives for corresponding, but in some cases, specific projects would be implemented:

Artwork Exchange. Pictures of student artwork taken with a digital camera along with grade level curriculum areas that correspond with the artwork would be exchanged. Our exhibit can be found on the Deer Park art web page: <http://www.fcps.edu/DeerParkES/kids/art/kinder.htm> and <http://www.fcps.edu/DeerParkES/kids/art/stepintoarts.htm>) In July 2002 the Northbourne School will post student artwork on their web page. This artwork will be submitted to the Oxfordshire District arts festival.

KeyPal Exchanges, continued

Hopscotch Around the World. Using the book, Hopscotch Around the World, both Northbourne and Deer Park students participated in beginning of the school year hopscotch activities during PE classes. The hopscotch games are played in the U.S. and Great Britain. To view the layout of these games and read the reactions of the games from the Virginian students' points of view, see: <http://www.fcps.edu/DeerParkES/kids/Hopscotch/hopscotch.htm>.

Language Arts Projects. Coordinated by Deer Park's librarian, Carol Clement, Deer Park sent to Northbourne the 2001-2002 Virginia Young Readers selection (a set of primary and a set of intermediate fiction and nonfiction books). These books are not generally available in England. Northbourne teachers either read the books aloud to their classes or students read them and then they asked questions and made observations about what they had read through keypal exchanges. In March, both Deer Park and Northbourne students were polled to determine which Virginia Young Readers books were favorites. Both the Deer Park Students and the Northbourne students chose the book The Secret of Platform 13 by Eva Ibbotson as the elementary favorite. Deer Park students chose Hooway for Wodney Wat by Helen Lester as the primary favorite book, and Northbourne students chose Tough Cookie by David Wisniewski as their primary favorite book.

Several e-mail discussions were made between classes with regard to the Virginia Young Readers books that the English children read. Ms. Delaney observed that her English students were unfamiliar with the American Civil War. However, after reading the book on Molly Bannaky, the children learned about the slave trade to America and the fact that the British banished their criminals abroad.

Specific words or phrases found in the American literature were also fascinating to the English children. In the book, You're a Brave Man, Julius Zimmerman, children read about a child being "a loser." Ms. Delaney wrote that her children found "this a very difficult phrase to accept and it was quite a topic of discussion." In the book, Not My Dog, there is a description of the character Ellie "throwing up." Ms. Delaney had to explain what the word meant to her students, meaning Ellie was "sick to her stomach." The English children kept a list of all the new "American" words they were learning: recess (break); sidewalk (pavement); math (maths or numeration); vacation (holiday). Younger children seemed to be most fascinated with the American spellings of words found in their Virginia Young Readers books.

A second reading project involved polling students at both schools to determine which of four Harry Potter books are favorites among the students. Harry Potter books are published by Scholastic Books, Inc. and are written by J.K. Rowling, an English author now living in Edinburgh. The American results are posted on the Deer Park web site at <http://www.fcps.edu/DeerParkES/kids/Media/index.htm>. We are currently waiting to hear how the English children view the books.

Science Project: Both first and second year students at Northbourne and grade two students at Deer Park study animals in their environment. In March and April Deer Park second grade students visited a local wetlands preserve, Huntley Meadows Nature Park. Northbourne students will visit their local environmental

KeyPal Exchanges, continued

habitat center in May. Deer Park second grade students wrote about the digital images taken on that field trip: <http://www.fcps.edu/DeerParkES/kids/hmeadows/huntley.htm>. We are looking forward to learning about animals found in wetland environments in England when Northbourne completes that project.

Class E-mail Discussions: Exchanges were made between teachers and their classrooms around such topics as when and how the children have recess, what they like to eat, and differences in holiday traditions. For example, a Deer Park sixth grade class explained to the Year Five English class how to play flashlight tag. In return, the English students wrote about Bonfire Night, when they celebrate the capture of Guy Fawkes during the reign of King James in the 17th century. They celebrate with bonfires and fireworks since Fawkes tried to blow up the House of Parliament with gunpowder on the 5th of November.

Mrs. Seidell's Kindergarten class at Deer Park wrote to their keypal partner about our Thanksgiving celebration. They explained that it was not a festival as the English children referred to it in their e-mails. Mrs. Seidell also found it interesting to learn how the English Kindergarten class (called the Infants Class) conducts instructional groups. The English call handwriting, painting, drawing, writing and science "structured play". The American children were also fascinated by the fact that the English children wear uniforms to school.

Implications for the Future

For the most part, Deer Park teachers indicated that the keypal project was successful, interesting, fun and educational. One Deer Park teacher did not receive a response from her keypal partner class, but we think that was due to a faulty e-mail address for that Northbourne teacher.

Ms. Delaney summed up the Northbourne teachers' feelings about the project by saying that the classes seemed to enjoy the e-mail exchanges but it was disappointing that we did not have much discussion about various aspects of our curriculums. She attributed this to the fact that specific subject areas are taught at different parts of the school year. For example, our second grade students study wetland animals in their environment two months before the English students are introduced to the topic so meaningful discussions to compare and contrast the units could not be made since the units were not taught simultaneously.

Just as Harris found in her studies that a "lack of time" is one of the major reasons why teachers don't make better use of the Internet in the classroom, Deer Park teachers said they wished that they had more time to spend online. When asked if they would conduct the project differently, most teachers said they would structure the way the e-mail sessions were conducted. Most teachers either rotated their students one at a time to a computer to type part of an e-mail message or the teachers wrote the message as children dictated their thoughts. Some of the suggestions for change were:

- Have a select group of students write the class e-mail messages.
- Assign student reporters to write the messages.
- Use parent volunteers to assist students as they rotate to computers to write messages.

KeyPal Exchanges, continued

The Northbourne teachers noted a difference in the use of technology between the two schools. Northbourne's computer lab was renovated mid-year and this had a definite impact on the availability of classes to send e-mails on a regular basis. Deer Park classrooms all have Internet access so groups of students can use the computers any time during the instructional day. Deer Park makes extensive use of its school's web page to post student projects. Northbourne is just in the beginning stages of creating a school web page and teachers hope to soon be able to also post their projects and school happenings on the Internet. Ms. Delaney also indicated that they hope to be able to engage in video conferencing. Perhaps that will be our next step, live audio and visual interaction!

Resources

For teachers wishing to initiate telecollaborative projects, the Appalachia Regional Educational Laboratory (AEL) suggests that they may want to make arrangements through professional contacts or organizations committed to making those links. To find a class in another location that will exchange e-mail with your students to learn about regional history, geography, economics or to share work, especially writing, try these sources:

- <http://www.siec.k12.in.us/west/slides/penpal/index.html>
- <http://web66.coled.umn.edu/schools.html>
- <http://www.epals.com>
- <http://www.globalschoolhouse.com>

References

- Appalachia Regional Educational Laboratory (April 2002). 180 Ideas and Resources for Teachers [Online]. Available: <http://www.ael.org/rtec/ideas.htm>.
- Becker, H.J. (1999). Internet use by teachers [Online]. Available: www.crito.uci.edu/TLC/FINDINGS/internet-use/startpage.htm.
- Education News (March 30, 2001). What Web? Teachers Seldom on Internet Survey Finds [Online]. Available: <http://fyi.cnn.com/2001/fyi/teachers.ednews/03/30/internet.schools.ap/>.
- Harris, J. (2002). Wherefore Art Thou Telecollaboration? Learning and Leading with Technology, 29(6), 54-59.
- Lankford, Mary D. (1992). Hopscotch Around the World. Morrow Junior Books: New York.



www.vste.org

KeyPal Exchanges, continued

- NetDay (2001, March 29). 84% of teachers say Internet improves quality of education [Online]. Available: www.netday.org/news_survey.htm.
- Pinhey, Laura A. (1998). Global Education: Internet Resources. ERIC Digest [Online]. Available: http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed417124.html.

About the Author

Diane D. Painter is the technology resource teacher at Deer Park Elementary School in Fairfax County, Virginia. She is also the Managing Editor of the VSTE Journal. She can be reached by e-mail at diane.painter@fcps.edu.

