

First Steps in Telecollaboration



By Judi Harris

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Grade Level: K-12

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An e-mail program and a Web browser can give any teacher access to a wide variety of learning activities that can be done with students in different locations. This month, Judi Harris discusses opportunities and choices for joining telecollaborative projects designed by other teachers.

Teachers are instructional designers. Sometimes we use our instructional design skills to invent new learning activities. At other times we use those same skills to *reinvent* (adapt, customize, build on) other teachers' learning activity ideas.

Perhaps you have read about how you can use thinking tools called *activity structures* and *action sequences* to help you design worthwhile curriculum-based telecollaborative activities. (If not, please see my articles in *L&L* vol. 26 nos. 1 and 6 and *Virtual Architecture: Designing and Directing Curriculum-Based Telecomputing* [Harris, 1998]). In this column, I'd like to suggest how you can locate, choose from, and reinvent educational telecollaboration that other teachers have designed and made available.

Educational Telecollaboration

"What's a telecollaborative activity?" you may be wondering. Put simply, it is an educational endeavor that involves people in different locations using Internet tools and resources to work together. Much educational telecollaboration is curriculum-based, teacher-designed, and teacher-coordinated. Most use e-mail to help participants communicate with each other. Many telecollaborative activities and projects have Web sites to support them. (More about how to design these kinds of sites is available in both *Virtual Architecture* and the "Mining the Internet" column in *L&L* vol. 24 no. 5.)

Telecollaborative activities can offer many educational benefits to their participants. The nature of these benefits depends, in large part, on the specifics of each activity's design, and how well what the activity makes possible matches the learning needs and preferences of participating students. In general, curriculum-based telecollaboration is most appropriate when students can be well served by:

- being exposed to differing opinions, perspectives, beliefs, experiences, and thinking processes;
- comparing, contrasting, and/or combining similar information collected in dissimilar locations;
- communicating with a real audience using text and imagery; and
- expanding their global awareness.

If one or more of these process-oriented goals is appropriate for your students in one or more curriculum areas, then participating in a telecollaborative activity is probably a good idea to consider. Are you wondering, though, about how you will find appropriate activities and projects amidst the ever-expanding vastness of the Web?

Telecollaboration Opportunities

Fortunately, several "virtual places" on the World Wide Web can help us find curriculum-based telecollaboration opportunities. Particularly helpful, frequently updated telecollaborative activity indexes include:

- Global SchoolNet's Projects & Programs (www.gsn.org/project/

[index.html](#)): This is the most comprehensive of all of the K–12 telecollaborative projects directories. Don't miss the searchable *Internet Projects Registry* at this site (www.gsn.org/pr/index.cfm).

- KIDPROJ (an aspect of KIDLINK, www.kidlink.org/KIDPROJ/): These globally focused projects involve learners aged 15 and younger from many different countries. All student participants must answer four questions about themselves and their ideas for making the world a better place prior to project participation.
- I*EARN Projects (www.igc.apc.org/iearn/projects.html): These are primarily social action projects involving participants from very diverse geographic locations.
- NickNacks Telecollaboration (www1.minn.net/~schubert/EdHelpers.html): This site contains many helpful suggestions about how to participate in educational telecollaboration. NickNacks also sponsors and points visitors to high-quality curriculum-based projects.
- Blue Web'n (www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/bluewebn/): This project-review service helps us locate telecollaboration opportunities according to curriculum area and four activity types—Web-based activities, Web-based projects, Web-based tutorials, and Unit & Lesson Plans. The contents of Blue Web'n's large projects database can also be searched by keyword.
- Innovative Teaching Projects (www.interserf.net/mcken/projects.htm): This is a comprehensive, frequently updated, alphabetized list of Web-based projects. It constitutes one section of a much larger set of online resources that assist and reflect "innovative teaching."

These sites can be perused and searched productively in several ways. You might:

1. Look for an activity idea in a particular curriculum area and for a specific grade level.
2. Look for an activity that asks students to engage in a particular learning-related process, such as writing persuasive essays or estimating distances.
3. Scan all of the project ideas listed for a particular curriculum topic, regardless of grade level, because many educational telecollaborations involve students of varying ages working together.
4. Seek out multidisciplinary, multi-featured projects that you sense would be particularly motivating and beneficial for your students to experience.
5. Periodically revisit these index sites, reviewing the project announcements that have appeared since your last perusal, considering each in terms of its applicability to your students' interests and needs.

Choosing the Telecollaboration

When choosing a telecollaboration to join, the most important criteria to use address students' learning needs and preferences. Ask yourself:

1. Will participating in this activity help my students learn relevant and educationally appropriate curriculum-related *content*?
2. Will participating in this activity require that my students use relevant and educationally appropriate curriculum-related *processes*?
3. Does this project *require* the use of Internet tools and resources to be done well? In other words, would offline tools and resources work just as well or better?

As you are making decisions about which project(s) to join, it's also a good idea to keep several logistical questions in mind.

Simple Project Search: (543 Projects Available)

Choose one of the 5 following simple search methods:

1. [show projects sorted by Age Level](#)
2. [show projects sorted by Project Start Date](#)
3. show projects suitable for students aged:

to years
4. show projects that begin in the following month and year:
5. show projects that begin *in or after* the following month and year:

Advanced Project Search: (543 Projects Available)

Show projects associated with the following Curriculum Area(s), Technologies Used, and Project Levels (make *no* selections to select all projects in that column):

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>Curriculum</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Arts <input type="checkbox"/> Business <input type="checkbox"/> Community Interest <input type="checkbox"/> Health and Physical Education <input type="checkbox"/> History and Social Studies <input type="checkbox"/> Information Technology <input type="checkbox"/> Language <input type="checkbox"/> Mathematics <input type="checkbox"/> Science <input type="checkbox"/> Technology <input type="checkbox"/> Vocational Education | <p>Technologies Used</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> CU-SeeMe or Other Video Conferencing <input type="checkbox"/> Email <input type="checkbox"/> IRC or Other Real-Time Chat <input type="checkbox"/> NetMeeting or Other Sharing <input type="checkbox"/> Web Based Discussion Forum <p>Project Level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Basic (simple information exchange projects) <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced (complex processing of data projects) |
|---|---|

AND which include these keywords in their project description or title: *(enter a comma between keywords - no spaces!)*

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|---|---|

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sort results by:

Figure 1. Global SchoolNet's online project search form. Graphic courtesy of the Global Schoolhouse/Global SchoolNet Foundation.

1. How often will this project require that my students and I be online? Do we have sufficient *access* to the tools and resources required for participation?
2. Do we have sufficient *time* to participate? Can we meet the interim deadlines specified by the project's creator? Do I have sufficient time and energy to do the additional preparation required by the project?
3. What *learning contexts* are necessary for effective participation in the project? Is our classroom amenable to small-group work? Would a rotating schedule of computer access be feasible? Is it comfortable for different students to be working on different tasks in the same room at the same time? Are the students accustomed to doing work responsibly in other parts of the school without direct supervision, if necessary?
4. Are the students and I sufficiently comfortable and competent with the particular *tools* required for participation (e.g., e-mail and Web browsers)? If so, you will be able to concentrate primarily on the curriculum-based learning facilitated by the telecollaboration, rather than on learning to use the tools themselves.

Many telecollaborative projects are appealing because of the power of their instructional designs, the elegance of their Web sites, or their direct relevance to your curriculum. It is important to allow this attraction to be tempered by sound pedagogical judgment. Yet, once you have found a telecollaboration that is educationally sensible, appropriate, and logistically feasible, how then should you proceed?

After You Find the "Perfect Project"

Most telecollaborative activities include some sort of *registration* procedure. Often this involves contacting the activity's organizer, either by e-mail or by sup-

plying information about your class using a Web form. The first step in telecollaboration, therefore, is to commit to participation, and communicate that decision.

The next step is to familiarize yourself with the specifics of *participation requirements* for your chosen project. These instructions are often posted at the project's Web site. Participation details can also be sent to you directly by e-mail once you have contacted the project's organizer. Be especially careful to note the beginning and ending dates for the project. Be even more careful to note any interim deadlines, especially those that require that your students' work be shared electronically with other students. Proactively renegotiate any deadlines that conflict with school vacations, other major project deadlines, professional development days, and so on.

Now *schedule* students' project-related work in your planbook or calendar, allotting approximately twice the normally required time for each project-related activity during the first few weeks of telecollaboration. (Any technical or procedural glitches will probably show themselves during the early stages of project work. Smoothing these "kinks" takes additional, usually unplanned-for time.) Be sure to *schedule* your preparation time, too. Include time to practice using the online tools and resources involved, time to gather relevant information resources into a bookmark file for your students to use, and time to communicate with telecollaborators before and during the project. Allow at least 48 hours for responses to each of your queries to arrive.

Gather the necessary *resources* that you will use to support and enrich your students' project-related work. These resources could be Web site addresses, library books, films, experts in project-related topics, art supplies, computer supplies, and so on.

Then, *tell your students* what's coming! Their participation can be much more self-motivated and in-depth if they anticipate their involvement with excitement and a clear sense of competence. You might also want to *tell your principal or colleagues* about what you are about to try. They might be able to offer you support and suggestions.

Last Thoughts on First Steps

My mentor and a co-writer for "Mining the Internet" uses a saying for which he has become (in)famous. It is directly applicable to this month's topic. Glen Bull is fond of quipping, "Anything worth doing is worth doing poorly."

Please think with me for a moment about the valuable lesson that Glen teaches in saying this, tongue-in-cheek. Whenever we take first steps in new educational directions, we discover what we didn't expect. First steps often look like stumbling. (Ever watch a baby learn to walk?) If we use these rich opportunities to help us learn by doing—as we encourage our students to do every day—the stumbling can serve a larger educational purpose. Soon we will know how to step assuredly, and together with our students, we can explore fascinating new virtual spaces for telecollaborative learning, one step at a time.

References

Harris, J. (1998). *Virtual architecture: Designing and directing curriculum-based telecomputing*. Eugene, OR: International Society for Technology in Education.



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