Telecollaborators Wanted: More than Seek & Find
By Judi Harris

Eureka! You've just gotten a *great* idea for a telecollaborative project that you *know* your students will love. You review what they would be doing as they work on the project, mentally checking to be sure that both content and processes that they would experience address the educational standards which guide your instructional planning. You think about their previous learning, their learning styles and preferences, and what you know to be their most pressing educational needs. The more you think about this project idea, the more convinced you are that it will be both enjoyable and worthwhile--for both students AND teacher.

You decide to go ahead with the project. You write notes to yourself about how to structure the activity; what materials to gather; what special events, equipment, and facilities to schedule. You find good days in the class calendar for the students to participate, and you're pretty sure that you've allotted enough class time for the students to complete the project. You create an enticing description of the project plan that you think would attract other teachers. You're excited. You can't wait to share your telecollaborative project idea with your students.

And then you realize that you're missing an important piece of information. How are you going to find the *other classes* to participate in the project?

You've just encountered one of the most challenging, yet intriguing, aspects of designing and directing curriculum-based telecollaboration: finding virtual partners to co-create powerful educational experiences at a distance.

Seeking Options

How *does* a teacher with a great telecollaborative project idea find others who would like to participate? There are several ways to do this. I've summarized them here as a rhyme to help you to remember the options. Stated simply, after writing a project announcement, you can:

Store it.

Spray it.

OR Select and convey it.

Store it in a database.

There are several well-established Web sites that encourage teachers to post new project descriptions as a way to attract distant participants.

The Global Schoolnet Foundation's Internet Projects Registry (http://gsh.lightspan.com/pr/index.cfm) is the most comprehensive of all of the K–12 telecollaborative projects directories. Its large database of project and activity invitations is searchable by age, project starting and ending date, curriculum area, technologies used, and project level. In addition, users can search the ever-growing collection of entries by typing their own keywords as search terms.

(Screen shot of http://gsh.lightspan.com/pr/index.cfm)

Your idea for a telecollaborative project can be added to the Projects Registry once you supply contact information about yourself. To add a project, you will be asked to supply its:
    Title and brief summary
    Beginning and ending dates
    Level ("basic" or "advanced")
    Curriculum fit
    Primary technologies used
    descriptive keywords
    Contact person's email address
    Registration specifications
    Cost (if any)
    Number of participating classrooms wanted
    Participant age range sought
    Target audience (regional, national, international, or open), including specific countries targeted, if "international" is chosen
    Web address, if applicable
    More detailed description
    Objectives and desired outcomes
    Sponsor (if any)

When this information is submitted, it is forwarded to a project moderator, who reviews it, then requests clarifications of you by email, if necessary. She then posts your project announcement to the Registry's publicly accessible database. The process usually takes 1 - 2 days. After the announcement is posted, you can update it, change it, or archive it after the project is complete.

Houghton Mifflin's Education Place hosts a smaller, but similar Project Center (http://www.eduplace.com/projects/) that encourages teachers to create and publicize projects of many types, both online and offline. Information from a Project Submission Form (http://www.eduplace.com/projects/submit.html) is added to a list of Online Projects (http://www.eduplace.com/projects/online.html) or Key Pals and Correspondents Exchange (http://www.eduplace.com/projects/keypals.html) when a telecollaborative activity idea is submitted. Though the collection of projects at Education Place is searchable only by the six categories shown in Figure 2, the lists are kept current and are a manageable size for browsing.

(Screen shot of http://www.eduplace.com/projects/)

Posting your project idea to a database such as the ones described above is probably the most technologically sophisticated, yet easy and efficient way to make your need for telecollaborators known. Yet there is a disadvantage to posting your ideas to a Web site, then waiting for others to read them and contact you. What if the teachers who would be "perfect virtual partners" don't know to *go* to the site(s) where your project idea is posted? What if they *do* visit the site, but don't happen upon your project description while they're there?

Spray it with an email list.

Another way to make your quest for telecollaborators known is to send your project announcement to an email distribution list. Sometimes called a "listserv," this is a mechanism by which interested email account-holders can have notices of potential interest automatically delivered to them via electronic mail messages. Some email distribution lists also allow participants to hold public discussions, in that anyone subscribed to the list can also send messages to it. These messages, and any responses they receive from other list subscribers, are copied and sent to each person who has registered to receive the list's postings. Such registration is

usually free, and email distribution lists have been in use on the Internet since the 1970's--long before the World Wide Web became available.

The keys to using email distribution lists to seek telecollaborators for your project are:

Post only to those lists that are read by larger numbers of teachers and teachers' curriculum and technology resource people, such as technology coordinators and curriculum directors.

Craft your project announcement so that it is engagingly worded, well-organized, succinct, clear, and complete. Tell what the project is, who should be involved, what they will do, and when. Be sure to include your name and email address as the project's organizer, your school's name, and your geographic location. If the project has a Web site, include the URL, along with directions on what to do once at the site to find out more about the project, then register to participate.

Many email distribution lists are relatively inactive, and others, though active, don't reach the folks who would most likely be interested in telecollaborating. It's important to choose carefully when planning to post to a distribution list. Four distribution lists that are good candidates for K-12 project publicity are:

WWWEDU: The World Wide Web in Education List
(http://edweb.gsn.org/wwwedu.html)

CRC: Connected Teacher Email List
(http://listserv.classroom.com/archives/crc.html)

NET-HAPPENINGS (http://listserv.classroom.com/archives/NET-HAPPENINGS.html)

IECC-PROJECTS: Intercultural E-Mail Classroom Connections Projects
(http://www.iecc.org/)

Each of these lists offers a searchable archive of past postings on the Web so that interested visitors can find your project announcement if they have joined the list after you have posted it--or even if they choose not to subscribe. IECC-

PROJECTS helps you to formulate your request for telecollaborators by providing a "connections form," as seen in Figure 3.

(Screen shot of http://www.iecc.org/iecc-form.html)

Please note, also, that when you add your project description to the Global Schoolhouse's Internet Projects Registry (described above), it automatically gets distributed to all subscribers to Hilites (http://lists.lightspan.com/hilites.html), another useful email distribution list for K-12 educators interested in telecomputing projects.

The primary advantage of posting your call for telecollaborators to an email distribution list is how quickly your announcement can reach the personal emailboxes of whomever is subscribed to the list. Assuming that the recipients read (or at least scan) their email frequently, this means that your project information will probably be read *faster* than if you posted it to one of the project databases mentioned above. The primary disadvantage to posting your project idea to one or more email lists is that many teachers just don't have time to read distribution list postings, and therefore are not subscribed to many--or any. If the list(s) that you select for dissemination aren't read by teachers whose students would benefit from doing the project that you have designed, you won't have reached the people who would be most interested in telecollaborating with you and your class.

Is there a way to "target" your project announcement? Yes--but it takes more time to do so.

Select those to whom to convey it.

Classroom Connect uses a different approach to finding others with whom to telecollaborate. Instead of announcing a particular project with a database entry or distribution list posting, the ConnectedTeacher service (http://connectedteacher.classroom.com/home.asp) allows teachers to enter a profile of themselves and their pedagogical interests into a Web-based, searchable database. Other teachers can use the Teacher Search service (http://connectedteacher.classroom.com/teacherContact/search.asp) to find colleagues with similar interests, then contact them directly by site-supported email. Teacher Search forwards email messages to members who have listed their

profiles in the database, making it possible for others to locate and contact colleagues without revealing profiled teachers' email addresses. Once contacted, profiled teachers can decide whether or not to respond to messages received, making their return email addresses known to the person who wishes to communicate with them. In early 2001, more than 11,000 teachers had contributed their profiles to this unique database.

Using a service like Teacher Search, colleagues could plan a project together, then ask students to participate when the plan is complete. Alternatively, once you have designed a telecollaborative project, you could search out teachers in the database whose interests reflect the project's grade levels, curriculum areas, and activity types. You could copy-and-paste your project description, then personalize a message to each teacher whose profile indicates potential interest in your project plan. Though this is a more time-consuming process than "storing" or "spraying" a project announcement, its focused and direct approach would probably yield a higher rate of response from busy teachers.

(Screen shot of http://connectedteacher.classroom.com/teacherContact/search.asp here, cropped so that the "Epals" paragraph at the bottom is omitted from the image.)

Of course, there are even *more* direct ways to select recipients to whom to convey your project announcement. School Web sites often display teachers' email addresses along with their teaching assignments, such as grade levels and content areas. If you are looking for participants in a particular area of the world, or if you would prefer to familiarize yourself with a teacher's previous online work before offering an invitation to telecollaborate, you can visit schools' Web sites to obtain email addresses to use. Teachers can be messaged directly, or campus technology coordinators, curriculum coordinators, or administrators could be messaged with a request to forward your project announcement to anyone at the school who might be interested in participating.

Gleason Sackmann's Hotlist of K-12 Internet School Sites - USA (http://connectedteacher.classroom.com/library/states.asp) is a frequently updated and impressive resource that provides links to U.S. schools' Web sites. These links are organized by state, then school level (elementary, middle, secondary). The city or town in which the school is located is listed in the index,

along with the school's name. Links to private schools, school districts, and state educational organizations are also included in this helpful resource.

To find school Web sites outside of the U.S.A., Web 66's International School Web Site Registry (http://web66.coled.umn.edu/schools.html #world) can be consulted. This is a well-organized resource that lists Web site links internationally for schools, districts, and related organizations by state, province, region, and country. Unfortunately, at press time many of these links had expired.

As I'm sure you can tell, "select and convey" is the most time-consuming way to make your telecollaborative idea known. Yet, it may be the most appropriate means to find a very focused or specialized group of online project partners.

An array to display

With more than 400 million users worldwide (http://www.nua.ie/surveys/how_many_online/index.html), the Internet is a very large virtual space. Getting word of your project idea to the teachers who might want to join you and your students as telecollaborators might be more of a challenge than initially expected. Yet, experience tells us that judiciously *combining* use of the methods and resources suggested above should help you to find folks who will share your excitement and commitment to making that idea a (virtual) reality.

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