

Taboo Topic No Longer

Why Telecollaborative Projects Sometimes Fail



It's time to tell the truth:

K-12 online activities sometimes falter.

Why does this happen?

What valuable lessons can we learn from
"developmentally delayed" projects?

By Judi Harris

It was puzzling. A colleague and I were asked by a small school district to help a group of very willing classroom teachers develop and implement curriculum-based telecollaborative projects. The conditions seemed perfect. Each teacher had at least one computer with high-speed Internet access in each classroom. All were comfortable and competent with basic productivity software and had been using these tools with their students, along with a variety of more specialized educational software, for at least a year. All had been using e-mail regularly for professional purposes, and some had begun experimenting with keypal projects and information searching on the Web to supplement curriculum-based learning.

The school district's leadership was very supportive of its teachers' professional learning, especially when it focused on curriculum-based use of educational technologies. The regional educational service center provided attentive onsite support for this experiment in individualized, longer-term professional development. The teachers were paid to attend a two-day, project-planning workshop that we taught onsite in the summer. They were then provided with their choice of one period per day of release time or overtime pay during the school year to do project-related work. Substitutes were provided to allow participating teachers to attend a midsemester, onsite, problem-solving session once their telecollaborative projects were under way. They had ongoing mentoring available by e-mail or telephone from a classroom teacher with three years' experience facilitating curriculum-based telecollaboration. Participants had freely and enthusiastically volunteered for this effort and showed high levels of motivation and interest throughout the six-month project.

Yet only about half of their carefully planned, exceptionally well-supported, curriculum-based projects were completed. That's what was puzzling to us. What made educational telecollaborations in near-perfect conditions fail? More importantly, what can we learn from these puzzling events about how to sustain and support online projects?

Answers from Project Coordinators

We don't often hear of telecomputing project failures. Terry Kerns's insightful article, "Designing Collaborative Projects for the Internet" (www.techlearning.com/db_area/archives/WCE/archives/kerns1.htm) describes the parameters of this heretofore "taboo topic" plainly:

Unless you have a tiny group and the stars are on your side, you will not get 100 percent completion. Even when individuals pay significant amounts to join projects, the completion rate is generally no higher than the 30% range. I've managed 70% on most projects—but only by sending constant reminders, personal notes, and other follow-up material to keep everyone on task.

I direct a K-12 telementoring project called the Electronic Emissary (www.tapr.org/emissary/), which has supported more than 400 curriculum-based projects to date. In the seven years the Emissary has been online, about 70% of our actively facilitated projects have been completed, mirroring Kerns's experience.

Why do even closely managed telecollaborations sometimes go unfinished? Conversations during a spring 1999 conference with Connie Miller and Sue Piper, both from the Hoquiam School District (<http://griz.hsd.wednet.edu/>) in southwestern Wash-

ington, and ongoing reflection among the Electronic Emissary's online facilitators helped me form and refine the following notions.

Why might educational telecollaboration falter or fail? Reasons usually concern the learning activity's larger context, planning process, or logistical specifics.

Context

Appropriate support for the project might not be available. Multiple levels and types of technical, administrative, collegial, financial, and community support are needed to ensure the success of telecollaborative projects. The story of the small school district that opened this article depicts such "near-perfect" support conditions. Yet, network problems caused by the unannounced installation of filtering software and a firewall led to many technical problems and much frustration among teachers and students. Technical support to assist users with new Internet access routines was spread thinly, even in this small district. Significant time delays in project work resulted, and participating teachers reported having to trim their project plans to fit their already-crowded schedules.

Note that Internet connections in each participating classroom are essential to the success of telecollaborative projects. It is only with this level of access that the frequent communications necessary to sustain higher-level discussions among remotely located students and teachers can occur without excessive inconvenience. When easy, dependable access to Internet tools and resources is available all day, every day in the classroom, telecollaborative projects can become just one more way that learning takes place, rather than being an infrequent "special occurrence."

Project development might have been inauthentic. Professional development activities can be an important source of support for teachers' learning, as long as these efforts are authentic and long-term. Telecollaborative projects developed as part of a one-time inservice workshop, rather than in response to students' curriculum-related learning needs and teachers' professional interests, often don't seem as "real" and "important" to project participants and therefore are at greater risk of being abandoned prematurely.

Project goals might emphasize technology use rather than curriculum-related learning. It is difficult for most teachers responsible for learning in the traditional disciplines to justify students spending significant in-school time and effort learning to use computer-based tools. Telecollaborative projects are best framed as explorations in science, language, mathematics, history, literature, and the like, rather than as "Internet projects," "e-mail activities," or "Web lessons."

Plan

The project's vision might be too complex, too general, or too singular. Plans for telecollaborative activities are usually communicated online, by e-mail, and among busy people. Therefore, they need to be simple and clearly stated but quite detailed. The more that projects can be collaboratively planned and refined among participating teachers and students, the more ownership all will feel, and the less likely the project will be abandoned before it is complete. Please note, though, that it is probably unrealistic to expect plans for a successful, completed project to emerge primarily from online discussions among participants; there is just not enough time in most teachers' and students' days to collaboratively plan *and* carry out more than a brief online activity. It's more effective and efficient to begin with a

clear project structure, fleshed out in planning discussions led by the project's coordinator, with some flexibility built in for customization at each participating site.

Most importantly, plans for the project must be a shared vision organized and supported by consistent leadership. If not, as the project takes shape among participating classrooms, collaboration at a distance will seem pointless, and the project will probably be abandoned by some. This implies that coordination, reflection, and discussion among teachers at the different sites must be ongoing. Realistically, it falls to the project coordinator to ensure frequent communication among contacts at different project sites. As Kerns reminds us,

A project's success is rooted in its planning and procedures. Even the greatest idea will die a lingering death somewhere in cyberspace unless you know exactly what you want to do and communicate it clearly to other participants.

Logistics

The project's time line might not have been specified in detail. Periodic updates on project activity at different sites might have been omitted. It is primarily the coordinator's responsibility to summarize decisions made during project planning, propose and refine interim deadlines in the project time line according to participating classroom school schedules, and, perhaps most important, send friendly but frequent reminders to site coordinators to make sure the project is carried out according to plan. As Kerns quips, "Like students of all ages, we need clear instructions, specific deadlines, and gentle reminders to overcome the natural urge to procrastinate."

So that project coordinators don't become overwhelmed (and unwilling to

lead a telecollaboration ever again!), it is helpful for different site contacts to volunteer to be responsible for leading development of different sections of the project's time line, with the project coordinator attending to how these project pieces fit together.

Also, once project work has commenced in multiple classrooms, it is important for participants to inform each other what is happening *offline* that is project-related. Much educational activity may be occurring at participating sites, but it will appear that the project has faltered unless periodic summaries of in-class activity from all sites are shared with the telecollaborative community.

One way to make such "progress reports" accessible by project participants on an ongoing basis is to create a frequently updated, Web-based repository of students' interim project work and "wonderings," project-related questions, and discussions. Such "virtual places" for curriculum-based projects can make the telecollaborative effort seem less ephemeral, and therefore less apt to be discounted and left incomplete. Suggestions on how to design these Web-based project spaces are available in chapter four of *Virtual Architecture: Designing and Directing Curriculum-Based Telecomputing* (ISTE, 1998; <http://ccwf.cc.utexas.edu/~jbharris/Virtual-Architecture/> and www.iste.org/Bookstore).

The amount of time allotted for project work might have been insufficient. Perhaps the most serious threat to successful telecollaboration is the shortage of time: namely, preparation time for teachers and class time for students doing project-related work. If at all possible, time for assisted and collaborative project development and coordination should be provided to teachers during the school day, perhaps as a form of ongoing, individualized professional development. I usually suggest

that project planners try their best to estimate how much time telecollaborative work will take *and then double that amount.*

The reality is that engaging, worthwhile pedagogy usually takes more time than we expect, particularly when projects are tried for the first time, and especially if they are successful. Kerns tells it like it is:

Don't kid yourself. Projects always take more time than first imagined. The better the project, the more successful it is—and the more time you will need to devote to it.

Beyond effective planning, the key to success is for online project work to become so intrinsically rewarding and extrinsically valued that the additional time and effort necessary to create powerful new telecollaborative learning experiences are willingly given by teachers, students, and administrators.

Participants

Telecollaborative projects may be curriculum-focused, but they are most definitely people-centered. Without effective collaboration, none would succeed. As Kerns reminds us, "No matter how much time or effort you devote to a project, your ideas will never become reality unless others join in and give of their own time and effort."

The true power of curriculum-based telecollaboration lies in this interdependency among remotely located partners.



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