Telecollaborators Wanted: More Than Seek & Find

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Telecollaborators Wanted

More Than Seek & Find

By Judi Harris

Subject: Telecollaborative projects

Audience: Teachers, technology coordinators, library/media specialists, teacher educators

Grade Level: K–12 (Ages 5–18)

Technology: Internet/Web, e-mail

Standards: NETS-S 4, NETS-T II. (Read more about NETS at www.iste.org—select Standards Projects.)

Eureka! You've just had 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 the content and processes they would experience address the educational standards that 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 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 to participate? There are several ways to do this. I've summarized them here as a rhyme to help you remember the options. Stated simply, after writing a project announcement, you can:

- Store it.
- Spray it.
- Or Select and Convey it.

Store It

Several well-established Web sites encourage teachers to post new project descriptions as a way to attract distant participants.

The Lightspan Network's Internet Projects Registry (http://gsh.lightspan.com/pr/index.cfm) is the most comprehensive of all of the K–12 telecollaborative projects directories (Figure 1). Its large database of project and activity invitations is searchable by age, curriculum area, technologies used, and project level (e.g., basic or advanced).
In addition, users can search the ever-growing collection of entries by typing their own keywords as search terms. You can add your idea for a telecollaborative project to the Projects Registry once you supply your contact information. To add a project, you will be asked to supply its:

- Title and brief summary
- Beginning and ending dates
- Level (e.g., basic or advanced)
- Curriculum fit
- Primary technologies used
- Descriptive keywords
- Contact person’s e-mail 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 (U R L), 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 e-mail, if necessary. She then posts your project announcement to the registry’s publicly accessible database. The process usually takes one to two 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 (www.eduplace.com/projects/) that encourages teachers to create and publicize projects of many types, both on- and offline. Information from a Project Submission Form (www.eduplace.com/projects/submit.html) is added to a list of Online Projects (www.eduplace.com/projects/online.html) or Key Pals and Correspondents Exchange (www.eduplace.com/projects/keypals.html) when a telecollaborative activity idea is submitted. Although 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.

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. But 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

Another way to make your quest for telecollaborators known is to send your project announcement to an e-mail distribution list or Internet mailing list. Sometimes called a listserv, this is a mechanism by which interested e-mail account holders can have notices of potential interest automatically delivered to them as electronic mail messages. Some e-mail 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 received from other list subscribers are copied and sent to each

Figure 1. The Lightspan Network’s Internet Projects Registry: http://gsh.lightspan.com/pr/index.cfm. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 2. Houghton Mifflin’s Education Place: www.eduplace.com/projects. Copyright © 2001 Houghton Mifflin Company. Reprinted by permission. Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.
The primary advantage of posting your call for telecollaborators to an e-mail distribution list is how quickly your announcement can reach the personal e-mailboxes of whoever is subscribed to the list. Assuming that the recipients read (or at least scan) their e-mail frequently, this means 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 e-mail 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 lists you select for dissemination aren't read by teachers whose students would benefit from doing the project 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 & 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 Con-
Select and Convey

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 United States, consult Web 66’s International School Web Site Registry (http://web66.coled.umn.edu/schools.html#world). This well-organized resource 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 (according to Nua Internet Surveys: 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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