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Making Long Distance Relationships Work

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Abstract

Many barriers can make it difficult for middle school teachers to collaborate about curriculum and instruction. The authors offer an approach for teaching the social studies through telecollaboration that mitigates some of these obstacles. This paper includes facets of telecollaboration, a rationale, a program design, and advice for middle school teachers wanting to develop telecollaborative partnerships. The authors also provide examples of electronic-pal protocols, telecollaborative hook-up topics, and sample reflection questions for teachers and students.

Introduction

Harris (1999) has identified when curriculum-based telecollaboration is most appropriate. It is best when students have opportunities to compare, contrast, and combine similar information collected from various locations. Telecollaboration is also best when students are expanding their global awareness. In what better place could this occur than in a middle school social studies classroom? Imagine for a moment an integrated unit on the Revolutionary War. A teacher might plan to share primary documents, to reenact battles and maybe even have a debate or discussion with another class down the hall. Imagine extending your classroom to a middle school classroom in England studying the Revolutionary War. Will this change the students' learning experience? Will they have access to different perspectives? Will they gain knowledge, new learning strategies, and empathy? And will they be able to make this new long distance relationship work?

Preparing future teachers to work with adolescents includes modeling the skills of technology integration. By involving preservice teachers in e-paling and telecollaborative activities including student-led presentations, artifact sharing, and local guest panels, preservice teachers are able to experience, first hand, appropriate uses of social studies and technology integration that they might

employ with children and adolescents. For teacher educators who share common interests in the social studies, new communication technologies provide tools to model substantive collaboration with colleagues outside of their community. Additionally, it is essential for preservice teachers to collaborate and to stay current with technology innovations for use in their future middle school classrooms.

Ideally, adolescents are expected to practice inquiry, to question, to reflect, and to transform information in all content areas. Middle school social studies teaching and learning experiences can also provide adolescents with opportunities to think like historians- to summarize, to contextualize, to infer, and to monitor. For more information and resources about thinking like a historian, visit the Digital History Inquiry Project site at <http://dhip.org/about.shtml>.

Adolescents have a natural curiosity about the world around them and technological savvy that may be more sophisticated than that possessed by their teachers, which could make middle-level students ideal participants in new types of teaching and learning arrangements, including telecollaborative experiences. The authors define telecollaboration as an experience that allows a joint teaching effort to occur without geographic limitations through the use of videoconference equipment. Social studies in the middle school can be expanded beyond the walls of traditional classrooms by using new technology tools to make authentic curriculum connections come alive. This model of instruction uses telecommunication tools to create new communities of learners for accomplishing shared intellectual endeavors (NCRTEC, 2000). Judi Harris (1999) identifies five interpersonal exchanges or ways to telecollaborate. They include keypals, global classrooms, electronic appearances, electronic mentoring, and question/answer services.

The Facets of Telecollaboration

A foundation for healthy social studies telecollaborative partnerships, at any level, can be built upon three major facets: the integration of social studies, the infusion of technology to support student learning, and the commitment to the importance of collaboration as a value, as well as a practice, in social studies. The authors realize that a telecollaborative experience can occur with only one facet, yet a stronger foundation is present if a combination of the three facets transpires simultaneously.

The first facet relates to seamlessly integrating technology through powerful teaching methods across content areas. The National Council of the Social Studies (NCSS) defines powerful teaching as teaching that is integrative, challenging, active, value-based, and meaningful to the students (NCSS, 2004).

The ultimate goal of a telecollaborative experience is for students to interact without noticing the “equipment,” while standards and curricular goals are being met. True seamless integration of technology occurs when students at both locations work collaboratively on shared projects and perceive each other as classmates.

The second facet of telecollaboration is the proper infusion of technology into the classroom. The guiding questions for this experience can be based on the Five Principles for proper infusion of technology into a social studies curriculum (Mason et al., 2000):

1. In what way does the effort extend learning beyond what would normally be accomplished?
2. In what way is technology introduced in context?
3. In what ways are integrative opportunities included and demonstrated?
4. In what ways is citizenship fostered and developed?
5. In what ways does this experience contribute to future research?

Constant reflection on these questions allows for teachers to make certain that telecollaboration corresponds with their teaching philosophy and classroom culture.

The third facet relates to collaboration. The authors define collaboration as effective communication, shared decision-making, and dialogue among all participants, teachers and students alike. Working together in cooperative learning partnerships can offer social and academic advantages. At the beginning of each school year, many teachers set up their own classrooms as collaborative communities involving students in establishing classroom rules, deadlines, and procedures. The telecollaborative activities prepared, tried, and outlined in this paper may suggest ways to promote and extend current collaborative teaching theories and practices beyond existing instruction. Communication and dialogue are the foundation for this type of telecollaborative instruction. Creating global classroom opportunities for students can lead to more interactive and collaborative learning experiences.

Rationale

Telecollaboration provides opportunities for students and teachers to exchange social studies ideas, to have access to other middle school classrooms, to learn from multiple perspectives, and to utilize technology to create relationships. It is through dialogue and interaction without worrying about geographic barriers that curriculum standards and objectives can be activated. Our telecollaborative experience reflects the “Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum” strand of The National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers (NETS), which includes the following:

1. Teachers must facilitate technology-enhanced experiences that address content standards and student technology standards.
2. Teachers must use technology to support learner-centered strategies that address the diverse needs of students.
3. Teachers must apply technology to develop students' higher order skills and creativity.

4. Teachers must manage student learning activities in a technology-enhanced environment.

The NETS for teachers can be found at:
http://cnets.iste.org/teachers/t_stands.html.

Our telecollaborative experience also reflects the content standards of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). The study of people, places, and their environment, the third of the NCSS curriculum strands, encourages students to create personal, spatial, and geographic connections beyond their own classroom. The NCSS standards in their entirety can be found at the following address: <http://www.ncss.org>.

Design of the Program

Collaborating with colleagues in middle school can be difficult due to the scheduling and isolation by content area. Therefore, we recommend an alternative where teaching and collaborating can occur simultaneously during the regular school day. Team teaching through video-conferencing and electronic mail do not require complex technology skills. However, a willingness to try is helpful.

The following approach can help open your classroom door to the world beyond the schoolhouse walls. This program consists of four parts: finding a partner, developing an electronic-pal protocol, deciding on telecommunication hook-up dates and content, and reflecting on these processes and activities.

The first step is to find a partner. Table 1.1, Sample Middle School Letter for Telecollaboration Partner Search, offers a sample middle school letter for your telecollaboration partner search. The following are areas for consideration during the telecollaborative partner search: finding a partner, verifying philosophies, scheduling teleconferences, and checking video conferencing equipment.

Finding a partner

1. Post a letter on a professional organization website or an appropriate listserv such as the classified section of E-pal.com
<http://www.epals.com/tools/forum/forum.e?bo=67&at=db>.
2. Think about asking a friend or colleague who teaches middle school social studies in another state.
3. Consider utilizing an upcoming state or national conference to locate a telecollaborative partner.

Verifying philosophies

1. Corroborate team teaching philosophies.
2. Confirm social studies philosophies.
3. Discuss viewpoints about technology integration.

Scheduling teleconferences

1. Check for time zone differences.
2. Take into consideration class sizes.
3. Limit teleconferences to one hour or one class period.

Checking video conferencing equipment

1. Test equipment compatibility.
2. Confirm Internet Protocol (IP) addresses the day before each telecollaboration.
3. Ten to 15 minutes prior to the telecollaboration hook-up, connect with the partner class to check the sound.

Table 1.1

Sample Middle School Letter for Telecollaboration Partner Search

Dear Colleagues,

I am a middle school social studies teacher. I am constantly searching for ways to enhance my social studies class with technology. Are you interested in telecollaborative activities? Do you have video conferencing technologies at your middle school? Are you teaching social studies during one of the time periods listed? Please look at my class schedule below. I teach 7th grade US History (general and honors). On the average, I have 25 students per class period. During the semester, I would like to begin with e-pals, interactive websites, and monthly telecollaborative meetings, in the hopes of expanding to weekly telecollaborative meetings in the future.

Please contact me if you are interested.

Thank you,

US History Middle School Teacher

My schedule: 7th grade Social Studies
7:45am-8:30am
8:30am-9:15am
9:15am-10:00am
10:00am-10:45am
10:45am-12:15pm Lunch/Planning
12:15pm-1:00pm
1:00pm-1:45pm
1:45pm-2:30pm

Upon finding a partner, the second and third steps involve creating an electronic pal protocol and a schedule of hook-up dates and content. After obtaining parent or guardian permission to participate in e-paling and telecollaboration, begin by pairing one student from each class. Students may be required to write to their e-

pal at least once a month prior to each telecollaborative meeting. Keep in mind, it is one thing to assign students to e-pal with other students and to set times for teleconferences to support distance learning, but it is another thing to get students to work together to pursue common ends. To be successful requires planning interesting and engaging learning assignments and also active, on-going decision-making to structure group activities and to motivate students to act together as teams (Luce, McKendry, Dool, Selim, Smith and Wolpert, 1992). Table 1.2, Sample Monthly Middle School E-Pal and Hook-up topics, offers monthly e-pal and telecollaboration topic suggestions.

Table 1.2

Sample Monthly Middle School E-pal and Hook-up Topics

Suggested Electronic Pal (E-pal) Topics	Suggested Telecollaborative Hook-Up Topics
<p>August: E-Pal topic: Introduction</p> <p>Have students introduce themselves in a creative way. For example, they can create a song, a jingle, a poem, or a limerick. The focus of this activity is the creative aspect. We do not want the students to feel uncomfortable sharing personal information.</p>	<p>August: Hook-Up topic: Introduction</p> <p>Brief Hook-Up (Optional) Explain telecollaboration to your students. For your own background information visit Judi Harris' "Virtual Architecture": http://virtual-architecture.wm.edu/ Research the history of computer communication. Test videoconference equipment Have students answer what they remember about social studies when they were in elementary school.</p>
<p>September: E-pal topic: Autobiography</p> <p>Have the students discuss 3 major/important events in their lives. Include the respective dates. Have students research and discuss 3 main events that occurred the year they were born. (Think on the following levels: local, state, national, and global.)</p>	<p>September: Hook-Up topic: Autobiography</p> <p>Have the students bring in an item that represents a part of their lives. They should be prepared to describe, contextualize, and summarize their personal relics.</p>
<p>October: E-pal topic: Family History</p> <p>Here are some possible topics for the students to discuss with their e-pals: Family Traditions: Define what family means to you? Did your family have any special traditions, such as things that they did on holidays or birthdays? What about family heirlooms? Is there anything that has been handed down from generation to generation? Hometown: What was the name of the town where you grew up? Was it a big city or a small town? Were there any special activities or festivals at different times of the year?</p>	<p>October: Hook-Up topic: Family History</p> <p>Choose one of the following for your October hook-up: Have each student bring a photo of a family member. Have students write a personal narrative from the perspective of the person in the photo. OR Design an extension lesson on the term "family." Research the history of the word family. Have the students create a timeline of how families have changed. Consider using television situation comedy clips to introduce media influence.</p>

<p>Previous Generations: Did you know your grandparents or great-grandparents? What stories can you tell about them and their lives? (Teacher caution: Consider your students' backgrounds if you choose these topics.)</p>	
<p>November: E-pal topic: Local History</p> <p>Have students discuss physical features/landmarks of their towns/cities. Students should share the absolute and relative location of their school. Discuss favorite restaurants, places to hang out, entertainment venues, etc.</p>	<p>November: Hook-Up topic: Local History</p> <p>Pair up the students in your own classroom. Give digital camera access to each set of partners. Have the pair go on a scavenger hunt for evidence of one of the core democratic values. Students can share their findings during the hook-up through Power Point, a Web Quest creation, or a document camera. OR Consider having an election discussion. Compare and contrast the candidates and their corresponding platforms as well as other related election issues.</p>
<p>December: E-pal topic: State History (This month's topic works well if e-pals are in two different states.)</p> <p>Use MR.HELP (Movement, Region, Human Environment interaction, Location/Place) (Parker, 2001) Have students discuss some of the following topics with their e-pals: Why did people move to your state? Why is your capital the capital? What are the regions? What is the climate? What are the main industries and occupations? What are some notable/historical sites?</p>	<p>December: Hook-Up topic: State History (This month's topic works well if e-pals are in two different states.)</p> <p>Work in groups prior to the hook-up date. Have each group work on one of the MR.HELP topics. Each letter represents one of the five themes of geography. Groups will present during the telecollaboration.</p>
<p>January: E-pal topic: Local or State Article Discussion</p> <p>Help your students locate two articles from a local or state newspaper. Students should read the articles independently and discuss one of the articles with their e-pals. Have the students write a short reflective summary to their e-pals. Some possible guiding questions can include: Why is the topic important? How will it affect you as a student and/or citizen?</p>	<p>January: Hook-Up topic: Local or State Article Discussion</p> <p>Have your students create a television network with classmates. Create a station name. Divide the students into anchor groups--for example, the Social Studies Network, or SSN, could include Economic Experts, a History Hotline, and Geography Gurus. Share prepared news stories of local/state interest with your telecollaborative partner class.</p>
<p>February: E-pal topic: GRIPE session</p> <p>Have your students brainstorm a local, state, or national problem that concerns them. Provide the following prompts: Tell your e-pal about the concern. Why does it</p>	<p>February: Hook-Up topic: GRIPE session</p> <p>Have your students pick a controversial issue (i.e., school uniforms, year-round school, school violence, dress code). Have a philosopher's chair or debate.</p>

<p>bother you? How can you change it or make a difference? Discuss some suggestions or solutions.</p>	
<p>March: E-pal topic: National History Day</p> <p>If your classes are participating in National History Day, have your students share their projects with their e-pals. Peruse the following website for information on National History Day: http://www.nationalhistoryday.org/ If your class is not participating in National History Day, have your students research an obscure facts website related to your current curriculum topic and have them try to stump their e-pals.</p>	<p>March: Hook-Up topic: National History Day</p> <p>If you are participating in National History Day, use this hook-up as practice/feedback for the school/regional/state/national competition.</p> <p>If you are not participating in National History Day, play a “Did you know?” game show with obscure history facts.</p>
<p>April: E-pal topic: Global Issues Day</p> <p>Give all of your students the same article about a global issue (e.g., terrorism, arms race, poverty, global warming, pollution, etc.) After reading the article, have the students discuss the issue with their e-pals. Brainstorm suggestions and solutions to the issue.</p>	<p>April: Hook-Up topic: Global Issues Day</p> <p>Take your students through a global connections virtual fieldtrip. (Teachers may have prepared a TRACK-STAR in advance related to how their hometown is connected to the world. Use http://trackstar.4teachers.org/trackstar/index.jsp)</p>
<p>May: E-pal topic: Heroes</p> <p>Have students choose someone in history whom they view as their heroes. Ask the following guiding questions: Why did you choose that person? How has that person affected your life? How has that person affected history? Is this person famous or infamous? Write/E-mail a dialogue back and forth between your famous person and your e-pal’s famous person.</p>	<p>May: Hook-Up topic: Heroes in Costume</p> <p>Allow the students to come to the hook-up dressed as their heroes. Require them to bring a card with 4-5 facts on it about their heroes. Have students read their facts aloud and play “Who Am I?” with your partner class.</p>
<p>June: E-pal topic: Final Meeting</p> <p>Try to arrange for your students to meet face-to-face.</p>	<p>June: Hook-Up topic: Final Meeting</p> <p>If a face-to-face meeting is not possible, consider conducting a student-led telecollaborative meeting.</p>

Following each telecollaborative class, it is important to receive feedback. Reflect with the partner teacher and with the students. The results of the reflective questions serve as a guide for improvement and serve as one of the tools to analyze critically the benefits and/or pitfalls of telecollaboration in student progress and professional development. Table 1.3 , Teacher and Student Reflection Questions, contains some examples of questions from higher education classes that would be appropriate for a middle school teacher and students as well.

Table 1.3

Teacher and Student Telecollaborative Reflection Questions

Teacher Reflection Questions*	Student Reflection Questions
Is the telecollaborative experience active?	What did you learn about social studies?
Is the telecollaborative experience relevant and meaningful?	In what manner can technology enhance the social studies course? Why?
Is the telecollaborative experience challenging?	In what ways is the long distance relationship with the other middle school a success? And not a success?
Is the telecollaborative experience value-based?	How would you define telecollaboration?
Is the telecollaborative experience integrative?	Would you recommend this technology-infused section of social studies to a friend? Why or why not?

*Teacher Reflection Questions derived from NCSS definition of powerful teaching.

Tele-advice

We advise you to start slowly. We suggest that you do not schedule weekly telecollaborative meetings, but rather monthly meetings. Before you set up your first conference, contact your technical support team for assistance in room set-up and scheduling. In addition, the technology support teams from each school should communicate with each other prior to every hook-up to verify the Internet protocol connection. Table 1.4 , Tele-Advice Columns, expands on telecollaborative terms, safety measures, and equipment needed.

Table 1.4

Tele-Advice Columns

Terms	Safety Measures	Equipment
<p>Internet Protocol Address (IP address): Numeric address of a computer on the internet. This is a series of numbers separated by periods that need to be entered to make a connection.</p> <p>Network Etiquette (Netiquette): Appropriate behaviors to follow while online with an e-pal or during a video conference. Adhere to the same standards online that you would follow in the</p>	<p>It is imperative that you consider internet safety precautions for the e-pal activities and the telecollaborative hook-ups.</p> <p>Check with your technology coordinator about internet permission slips. Be sure to follow the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). See the following website if you need further information: http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/pubs/online/teachers.htm</p>	<p>Some of the video conference equipment that we utilize for our telecollaborative partnership is in the photos below. Most equipment includes microphones. However, additional microphones or wireless microphones may be purchased. Document cameras are additional pieces of equipment you may want to incorporate into your telecollaborative experience.</p>

<p>traditional classroom.</p> <p>Electronic Pals (E-pals): E-mail partners, sometimes called key pals.</p> <p>Visit http://www.ecu.edu/itcs/act/vc/glossary.htm for a glossary of additional videoconferencing terms.</p>	<p>Furthermore, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) includes rules and regulations related to privacy for students, staff, and faculty. Visit http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html for more information.</p>	<p>If this equipment is not available, inquire at your central office, or perhaps write a technology grant. The following site contains information on grants in technology education: http://techlearning.com/resources/grants.jhtml</p>
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Polycom Camera (photo submitted by author)



Polycom Camera/Television (photo submitted by author)



Final Checklist

The following telecollaboration recipe is a final checklist to reference as you begin this new adventure in teaching. The recipe includes necessary tools for program success.

<p>Recipe: Middle School Telecollaboration</p> <p>Prep time: In order to plan, your initial hook-up may take a few conference calls and e-</p>
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mails.

Cook time: We suggest a 45- to 60-minute class period per hook-up.

Yields: An enjoyable and educational technology and social studies integration experience.

Preheat: With sufficient bandwidth (approximately 512kbs).

Ingredients for a successful telecollaboration:

- Signed parental permission slips from all participants
- 2 willing middle school teachers, not in the same school and preferably not in the same state
- 1-100 open-minded adolescents
- A CODEC, Coder/Decoder (i.e., Polycom, VTEL, Tandberg)
- An Internet Protocol (IP) address for each location
- Microphones (included with some cameras)
- Cameras (i.e., a document camera, an audience camera , an instructor camera)
- Examination of the National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers' (NETS) 10 teacher essential conditions. Visit http://cnets.iste.org/teachers/t_esscond.html

Optional topping: Have a technology support person/team to assist with sound or picture trouble-shooting

Note: After baking, allow time for student and teacher reflection.

Conclusion

Implementing telecollaborative strategies is a challenge for even the best of teachers. It is natural to be both excited and anxious when trying something new. Knowledge, technical support, and experience can alleviate feelings of anxiety and fear. By following the plan provided, a middle school teacher should feel equipped with the tools necessary to begin a successful telecollaborative partnership. In the quest of middle school students to make sense of their world, it is important to realize that these telecollaborative activities can add relevance and meaning to learning. Implementing this curriculum innovation has the potential to enhance the traditional middle school classroom.

If you find yourself involved in a telecollaborative experience, we would love to hear your story. Please contact us at gooda@mail.euc.edu, occonnork@mail.ecu.edu, and/or eric.luce@usm.edu.

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