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Around the world, teachers are using online education tools to bring a global perspective to the classroom.

To compete in the constantly evolving global marketplace, businesses around the world use Web sites, podcasts, blogs, videos, interactive forums, and other digital tools to connect with their customers, expand their international presence, and foster partnerships across borders. In the 21st century, "business as usual" just doesn't cut it anymore. Now, too, many educators are starting to catch on to the 21st century way of doing things. Using the same innovative digital tools as industry leaders, educators around the globe are developing cross-cultural education projects to bring the knowledge, resources, and diverse cultures of the world into their classrooms. From the remotest villages to the densest urban centers, students are communicating, collaborating, and learning in new and exciting ways.

When teachers develop international projects using online resources to connect classrooms, these experiences can give students a chance to learn 21st century skills such as ICT (information and communication technologies) literacy, creativity, critical thinking, and civic literacy while also developing a deeper understanding of the world and their place in it.

Using portals such as the International Education and Resource Network (iEARN) and ePals, teachers can connect with other educators in almost any country to develop activities ranging from collaborative science experiments to natural disaster preparation projects to fun cultural informational exchanges.

Starting a Learning Revolution

Internationalizing classrooms through online educational collaborations can have numerous tangible and intangible benefits for students. These types of projects can help students develop technical competencies in different forms of digital media including video equipment, digital cameras, audio recorders, and computer software. Also, students can improve their literacy skills by reading and writing e-mail, blogs, and other communications.

Students also learn from each other as they share experiences; discuss their lives, families, and communities; and give feedback on one another's academic work. Educators using technology to bring the global perspective to their lessons are truly opening the door to the

universe of knowledge.

Research shows that to be successful in the 21st century, young people will need the type of skills training and socialization that online cross-cultural education projects can provide. In addition to technology skills, young people also must learn 21st century skills such as working collaboratively with people of diverse cultures, religions, and backgrounds; thinking critically; and solving problems. In the 2006 presentation *The Old and the New: A Learning Revolution* for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Marshall S. Smith, Phoenix M. Wang, and Catherine M. Casserly urged educators to move beyond teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic to prepare young people for the competitive global marketplace. "Every nation will need far more workers who are able to take responsibility, work cooperatively, grapple with uncertainty, [and] behave creatively," they said.

Just as the skills students need are changing, so are the ways they acquire this knowledge. By using technology, regardless of their location, students can have access to a vast array of educational resources at all times. Smith, Wang, and Casserly explained that technology can enhance the learning experience by providing open access to educational resources such as online library collections, books, videos, translators, and other resources. The world is literally available at students' fingertips.

Students feel motivated by learning-by-doing when they use technology to develop strategies, solve problems, and participate in interactive projects with other students.

Not only do they need to acquire 21st century skills, but when they do it in an exciting environment, they just might actually enjoy it!

Globally Competent Graduates

Twenty-first century success will require students to think, act, and perform differently than previous generations. Heather Singmaster, senior program associate at the Asia Society, thinks that's a good thing.

"The world in which today's students will graduate is far different than the world in which we grew up," says Singmaster. The Asia Society supports educational practices designed to develop "globally competent graduates" who possess "knowledge of other world regions, cultures, economies, and global/international issues; critical-thinking skills and the ability to apply them flexibly to world problems and scientific challenges; communication skills, including skills in communicating in languages other than English, working in cross-cultural environments, and using information from different sources around the world; and values of respect for other cultures and of civic engagement," says Singmaster.

The Asia Society recently created the Partnership for Global Learning, which is a network of schools, education leaders, and policymakers committed to "moving international education from the margins to the mainstream of American education." This network, Singmaster says, connects state and district decision makers, school leaders, teachers, university leaders, and other stakeholders to build the capacity of K–12 educators to develop "college-ready, globally competent youth by integrating knowledge and skills throughout the curriculum and to foster

policies and resources at the national and state level to encourage global learning."

Teachers can't create globally competent graduates in isolation. They must reach out to other teachers, tap into international resources, and create partnerships to enhance student learning.

Connecting with iEARN

In its 20-year history, the K–12 network iEARN (www.iearn.org) has connected more than 2 million students and close to 26,000 educators in 125 countries. iEARN is something of a meeting place where teachers can develop projects based on their content areas, interests, and grade levels. Teachers design their own projects, curriculum, and rubrics according to their agreed-upon goals and objectives.

The iEARN projects can be classroom to classroom, or they can involve multiple classes or schools. At the conclusion of each project, participants must create some type of exhibition such as a Web site, publication, blog, art show, or video, explaining how the project influenced student learning.

Using the network, educators are not constricted by geographical boundaries or political or cultural barriers. Teachers can offer their students a chance to experience life in a totally different world.

In 1988, iEARN developed a project linking 12 schools throughout the state of New York with 12 schools in Moscow. Despite chilly relations between the two countries during the Cold War, the students communicated via e-mail, lumaphones (video speaker telephones), and student and teacher exchanges and shared an important educational experience that benefited students, teachers, and school leaders.

Alla Shushkovskaya, principal of a participating school in Moscow, wrote about the pioneering project in *iEARN Interaction*. Shushkovskaya explains that his school partnered with a New York high school on a variety of ecology, history, language, and sports projects. Politics aside, the students were able to see their shared bonds.

"Historically, that period was very difficult in our country," says Shushkovskaya. "This project helped our students and teachers to open the door to the international society and to perceive themselves not only as citizens of the country, but also citizens of the world." Today, Shushkovskaya's school continues to collaborate on international education projects, and his students are participating in projects with students in Japan, Great Britain, Canada, Italy, and the United States.

Ed Gragert, executive director of iEARN-USA, says projects such as the first momentous U.S.S.R.–U.S. exchange can greatly enhance the academic experience by engaging students. Students feel more motivated to learn when communicating with other young people because the authentic experience allows them to take ownership of their learning, says Gragert.

These projects also "put [lessons] in a real context, in a global context," says Gragert. "A lot of students don't understand why they are learning something because they don't immediately use it. When they are engaged with other students, and they see other students showing an

interest in what they are studying—they are more willing to go to the next [level]. Students are then taken into directions the teachers didn't anticipate."

Students may do lessons—such as conducting a scientific experiment or writing a poem—and post them online and receive feedback from students in the other classroom, explains Gragert. "They get feedback from an authentic audience of their peers who are commenting on [their work]. That sort of student-to-student dialogue [doesn't always happen in a traditional classroom]. Sometimes they don't even realize they're learning, and they don't realize they're getting the cross-cultural piece. It's direct learning *with* someone instead of *about* them."

Teacher collaboration is really the key to success for these international educational partnerships, notes Gragert. Through iEARN's interactive forums, workshops, and conferences, teachers can ask questions, share ideas, and discuss what works and doesn't work to continually improve their partnerships. "Teachers learn from other teachers," says Gragert. "They want to hear what it was really like doing it in the classroom from another teacher."

Mapping a Global Solution

Around the world, learning and teaching is evolving as classroom educators prepare their students to be globally competent citizens of the 21st century. Yoko Takagi, the country coordinator for Japan iEARN (also known as JEARN), says online education projects have numerous educational benefits, including giving students in even the most isolated areas access to new experiences and knowledge.

"Technology is an instant tool to provide students the new 21st learning environment in the classroom. It doesn't matter if the schools are located in a small island or in remote mountain areas once they have access to the Internet. They all enjoy the same quality of education when we compare them with larger schools that are highly technically armed in bigger [internationally recognized] cities."

Takagi explains that through online forums, videoconferences, Web sites, and other media, students can meet "co-learners" to "build and grow human relationships." This type of interaction helps students to "find value and respect for others, and find their own value and respect for themselves," she says.

One JEARN project bringing kids together from all over the world is the Natural Disaster Youth Summit (NDYS). The online collaboration was started after the Natural Disaster Youth Summit in 2005, which gathered Japanese youth affected by the 1995 Hanshin Awaji earthquake as well as children who had experienced natural disasters in their countries, to promote awareness about natural disasters around the world. NDYS now includes participating students from 21 countries, including Australia, Cuba, Iran, Nigeria, and Papua New Guinea.

Each class creates a disaster safety map charting the areas surrounding their schools, with the goal of creating a global disaster map when all the schools participate. The Global Disaster Safety Map Project (http://ndys.jearn.jp/GDSM.htm) teaches students to think about the safety of their local communities; identify potential disasters; and discuss disaster management solutions.

After conducting research about past natural disasters in their communities and analyzing local disaster recovery plans, students develop a map of the area surrounding their schools, identifying local urban areas and mountain and flatland areas; waterways; transportation routes; open spaces; government institutions; medical facilities; disaster relief areas; fire departments; police stations; schools; public facilities; hazardous areas; and evacuation points, among other items. On the basis of this information, students design an evacuation plan and identify potential risks and problems.

Students share their research through the NDYS Web site, blog, listservers, and other interactive tools. Some classes have even participated in videoconferencing, allowing students to discuss their projects face-to-face. NDYS includes a separate forum for teachers to share ideas.

International projects like NDYS that encourage students to work collaboratively, share information, and solve critical problems together can revolutionize the way we interact on a global scale. "Communication with patience and in a respectful manner with [people of] different cultures is the only way to solve our troubles and create a better world," says Takagi.

ePals' Blogging Buddies

Another popular platform for e-learning is ePals (www.epals.com), which connects students and teachers in approximately 200 countries and territories. Users have access to a secure e-mail system and online forum, and students can create their own blogs.

David Huffaker's study *Let Them Blog: Using Weblogs to Advance Literacy in the K–12 Classroom* extols the benefits of student blogging. He argues that blogging helps students gain valuable 21st century skills such as digital literacy, promotes verbal and visual literacy, provides a space for students to engage in storytelling, and allows students to interact with students in their own age and developmental groups.

Huffaker says blogs help "create a community of practice among participating students. They can collaborate with each other and build knowledge. These types of discussions, where ideas are synthesized and new ideas created, may be intrinsic to building critical-thinking skills. They may also feel that they are 'part of a team' and that each individual has a responsibility to contribute in order to achieve success for the group," says Huffaker.

At Patrick Henry High School in San Diego, Calif., Candace Pauchnick, a human psychology and sociology teacher, uses ePals to connect her students with Professor Chen Yaodong's students at China's Guangxi Polytechnic University. Both groups of young people post blog entries, in addition to exchanging e-mail and doing videoconferences.

Through their blog entries, the students engage in discussions about culture, politics, stereotypes, interests, and whatever else comes to mind. Pauchnick and Chen facilitate the process by encouraging ePals users to add to their list of suggestions for students' blog topics. Suggested topics include issues of gender equality in each country; the recent earthquake in China and its effects on the Chinese students and their communities; fast food and obesity; and the Olympics. The students post comments, providing their own unique perspectives on

the different issues.

Pauchnick says her students feel motivated to learn when blogging and interacting with their new Chinese friends. "I see them motivated to learn when they connect to [their] ePals," says Pauchnick, who conducted a study comparing students in her classes where she used ePals to classes where she did not. "I noticed that the students who did not have the ePals did the research on China with less enthusiasm than those who were connected to an ePal. Students with ePals had much more interest in class discussions because they could share items they learned from their letters. My shy students would talk more, too. The lessons were 'real-to-life' and my students could feel more connected to what they were learning," she says.

In addition to being more motivated, the students benefited academically because the extra reading and writing enhanced their literacy skills. "Another bonus is that my students were more motivated to write, and they had to write correctly so their ePals could understand what they were saying. Since the Chinese students were learning English, it motivated my students to write as [well] as possible. This was sometimes a challenge since I also have students who are learning English," says Pauchnick.

Pauchnick also saw that her students developed a very real sense of compassion for their Chinese partners. "When the earthquake hit in China last year, my students were genuinely concerned for their ePals," she says.

Pauchnick and Chen also regularly post blog entries to discuss the exchange with interested educators and to gather new ideas and suggestions from other teachers. Pauchnick recommends this type of online educational resource for teachers looking to internationalize their classrooms and differentiate instruction: "All the various projects the ePal program offers [help] teachers from all over the world to find areas that meet individual needs," she says.

Speaking at the 2006 Future in Review conference, Pauchnick explained how using technology to create cultural connections through project-based learning changed everything for her students and for herself. "It's essential to have technology in the classroom. My students are addicted to technology. In fact, they spend between 30 minutes and three hours a day on their blog pages. I see this addiction as the catalyst to educational improvement," said Pauchnick. "I can tell you from firsthand experience, collaborative project-based learning is gripping the nation, and education, because it does enhance learning and students are much more engaged."

This is a new era for education. Just as businesses are changing the way they operate in a global environment, so are schools. "Our industry is rapidly changing," said Pauchnick at the Future in Review conference. "I see the future with the traditional textbooks all going online or on CDs with companion Web sites . . . I see the future of education with schools becoming hybrids: blending online technology with socialization in community schools but connecting with schools all over the world."

Four Rivers, One World

In New York, Christine Kola works with 8th graders in an after-school program as part of the Four Rivers, One World project, which brings together Kola's students with young people in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal. In 2008, Kola joined the project after meeting Geetanjali Bodhankar, who is a 9th standard (U.S. 9th grade) teacher in Pune, India.

iEARN-Bangladesh, iEARN-India, iEARN-Nepal, and iEARN-USA are collaborating with the Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science Education (CIESE) at Stevens Institute of Technology in New Jersey, and the Waterkeeper Alliance in New York City. The project also receives support from the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs.

Through videoconferences and the Four Rivers, One World online forum, the teachers planned the project, tapped experts, and assembled volunteers. Now, each of the four groups conducts water-analysis experiments in a local river, with the intention of using their findings to make recommendations about how to protect the rivers in their communities.

Kola's students test and analyze water samples from the nearby Bronx River. The students are testing for nitrates, phosphates, pH, dissolved oxygen, and turbidity, explains Kola. They share their results with the other participating classes and compare data.

Kola recently visited India, where she spoke with Bodhankar's students. Both teachers encourage their students to e-mail regularly to share information about both the project and their lives. Kola says she can see the effect the cross-cultural partnership has had on her students' understanding of their ability to be change agents in a global society.

"My students are learning about the environment and how essential it is to protect our most important natural resource. However, they are also thinking more globally and not just [of] their immediate surroundings," says Kola. "All of my students have volunteered to do this; it is not part of their grade. They are acquiring knowledge of environmental situations and discovering that their opinion counts. They are realizing that everyday citizens can protect and help the environment."