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Cultural connection : a communication project designed to enhance cultural awareness and global workforce skills

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Cultural connection : a communication project designed to enhance cultural awareness and global workforce skills

Abstract

The Cultural Exchange Project was developed to be a collaborative activity that would allow students from a computer applications class in Waterloo, Iowa, to communicate through electronic mail (email), letters, and video with students from a Polish high school. The project was developed to provide cultural awareness, foster international relationships, improve communication skills, and promote technology usage. Students completed various activities to prepare for and enhance this project. These activities included: lessons in "netiquette"; reports on other cultures, and worksheets for sharing personal information. Each student was assigned a partner to communicate with individually through letters and email. The author found that this type of activity engaged students in a "real world" application and heightened their level of interest.

Cultural Connection: A Communication Project Designed to Enhance Cultural
Awareness and Global Workforce Skills

A Graduate Research Project
Submitted to the
Division of Educational Technology
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Devon M. Anderson Winters

August 3, 2001

This Project by: Devon M. Anderson Winters

Titled: Cultural Connections: A Communication Project Designed to Enhance Cultural Awareness and Global Workforce Skills

has been approved as meeting the research requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Abstract

The Cultural Exchange Project was developed to be a collaborative activity that would allow students from a computer applications class in Waterloo, Iowa, to communicate through electronic mail (email), letters, and video with students from a Polish high school. The project was developed to provide cultural awareness, foster international relationships, improve communication skills, and promote technology usage. Students completed various activities to prepare for and enhance this project.

These activities included: lessons in "netiquette"; reports on other cultures, and worksheets for sharing personal information. Each student was assigned a partner to communicate with individually through letters and email. The author found that this type of activity engaged students in a "real world" application and heightened their level of interest.

Introduction

This paper reports on a project entitled Cultural Connections. The project was developed to provide an opportunity for high school students in Iowa to communicate with high school students in Poland. It was meant to provide cultural awareness, foster international relationships, improve communication skills, and promote technology use. This inter-school strategy is supported by Symonds (2000) who states, "To prepare students for the New Economy, reformers are pushing for a curriculum that uses the Internet and technology to immerse kids in the intellectual challenges they will face after graduation" (p. 191). This project provides students with an intercultural communication experience that will benefit them in their professional lives. Cifuentes, Murphy, and Davis (1998) also found in their research that "students' self-esteem, academic achievement, and multicultural understanding increased" due to a collaborative activity (p. 103).

The Cultural Connections Project was a collaborative activity that allowed students from a Northeastern Iowa high school Computer Applications class to enhance their cultural awareness and to develop international partnerships through communication with high school students in Poznan, Poland. Individual students were assigned partners to communicate with through postal letters and email. A cultural exchange project website (Appendix A) was used to improve communication and to show students with whom they were paired.

The communication process began with the American students creating an introductory videotape for the Polish students, with each student sharing

some personal information and defining culture. Students were asked to provide a personal definition of culture. These definitions were discussed in their classrooms to draw a conclusion of what culture means to society in general and how it may be different or similar in another country.

The project continued with each American student writing a letter to his or her partner to share additional personal information as a means of introduction and to open channels of communication. To facilitate the exchange process, the American teacher traveled to Poland and brought these letters, along with a small gift for each Polish student from the American students. These items were taken to the Polish students as a way to introduce the American students to their Polish counterparts. The Polish students also wrote letters and gave small gifts to share with the American students. The American teacher also carried these items back to Iowa for her students.

While the instructor was in Europe, the American students were preparing reports on a foreign country of their choice. These reports focused on unique details and general information about the country being studied. These reports were completed to enhance the students' cultural knowledge and required students to think about similarities as well as differences between cultures. The reports were created in Modern Language Association (MLA) format to provide reinforcement of report formatting skills previously learned in the classroom. Upon completion of the reports, each student was asked to give a short oral presentation to the whole class highlighting some of the important features about the country he/she studied. Students gained cultural awareness through their

own research but also by listening to others present their reports on their countries. The presentation session ended with a discussion about the similarities and differences of the countries presented.

A worksheet entitled "Information Guide for Foreign Students Visiting Our City" (Appendix B) was completed by both the American and Polish students so that the partners could learn more about the other country and more specifically about the city where students live. This worksheet provided students with a way to describe places of interest, favorite locations, and activities. The information that was provided on the worksheet was of interest to each group of students because it was a guide completed by people of approximately the same age.

This cultural experience developed technology skills through the use of computers for email, Internet access, and word processing. Kroonenberg (1994/1995) states, "In addition to developing writing skills, email activities further develop students' reading comprehension and thinking skills. And, with follow-up classroom activities, speaking and listening skills are also enhanced" (p. 24). When students were given the task of orally presenting their reports on other countries, they demonstrated the skills Kroonenberg described. All of the activities in this project aligned perfectly with the School Improvement Plan for the Iowa school district. Iowa schools are charged with improving students' reading and writing abilities.

The Iowa students were also able to learn about the capabilities of digital video. Students were involved in creating the iMovie (Appendix C) in which they each introduced themselves and explained what they believe culture meant. Iowa

students used a microphone to input audio onto the videotape and viewed their own clip to determine if it needed to be retaken. These students also assisted in the selection of the background music for the videotape. Polish students were interviewed about their views of culture on camera as well. They were provided with an explanation of the digital video development process. The instructor then produced another iMovie of the Polish students (Appendix D).

To assist the students with developing and improving technology skills through communication; the Iowa students completed a "netiquette" lesson and both groups of students emailed their partners using computers to write the letters. Iowa students completed the "netiquette" lesson to assist them in learning the rules of Internet communication before participating in email lessons. All of the students' communication skills were enhanced because they were required to discuss issues with their partners via email and within classroom groups, and through the preparation of a report, letters, and emails. As students wrote letters and emails, they appeared to care more about how and what they were saying than a normal lesson would elicit.

Kroonenberg (1994/1995) found that using:

Electronic mail (email) encourages students to use computers in realistic situations so that they can develop communicative and thinking skills... They are eager to communicate their thoughts in comprehensible language... Students are also clearly interested in reading, understanding, and responding comprehensively to what their classmates have to say (p. 24).

As this author noted, the American students were more determined to explain themselves in a clear manner and asked detailed questions about comprehension while writing emails and letters. As Kroonenberg (1994/1995) found through her research, "Composing on a keyboard seems to provide a certain motivation that I do not see when students compose their work by hand" (p. 26). The author's experience with this project demonstrates a similar conclusion. The Polish students also asked for assistance in writing effective letters but the author noticed that these students did not feel as comfortable asking questions of the American teachers. The communication was to continue between the partners for the remainder of the school year through email. Instructors in Iowa and Poland were to monitor the progress of the communication between students and set up expectations for behavior on the Internet and within the communications.

All of these activities have enhanced the Iowa students' cultural awareness and provided them with an international experience that will assist them in future global experiences. Additionally, the experience of communicating globally has allowed the students a better understanding of how close other people in the world can be and how one must be prepared to communicate globally in the workforce. Working in today's society, students will now be expected to apply technological skills to the day-to-day operations in the workplace. As Galowich (1999) points out, "it is necessary to be able to use it (technology) to learn, problem solve, and function on a daily basis" (p. 2).

Methodology

The author selected the reference material used in this paper after careful consideration about what was anticipated for the project. The author researched articles that referenced collaboration, cultural exchange, technology in the classroom, email, and communication. Sources were then selected based on information that dealt with these areas and assisted in showing the benefits of collaboration. The emphasis was also placed on how this type of project enhances students' abilities to enter the global workforce and how it is needed for success in the workplace of today.

Project Description

Before the teacher's trip to Europe, students in Iowa were required to open email accounts and practice discussing issues via email with classroom partners. They learned how to respond, compose, and forward messages. Students completed a "netiquette" unit and were instructed on appropriate Internet behavior. American students also created international reports to help them understand about diverse populations and cultures. Students were then asked to have their parent(s) or guardian(s) sign a form that allowed them to take part in this project (Appendix E). A video was created using iMoive as an introduction to the lesson and as an avenue for the American students to explain what culture means to each of them (Appendix C). Students also completed the "Information Guide" worksheet (Appendix B) to send to the Polish students.

Once in Poland, the American instructor was allowed to teach in a Polish high school classroom for three days. All the Polish students spoke some English

but the instructor needed to make sure that she explained things clearly and spoke slowly. She had Polish interpreters available if she needed something translated to ensure understanding. On the first day, after watching the American student introduction video, Polish students were given gifts and letters from the American students. After reading the letters, the students were asked to write reply letters to their American partners. While the class was busy writing letters, individual students were taken into a hallway to be videotaped for his/her introduction and personal definition of culture (Appendix D).

On the second day, the Polish students were taken into a computer lab where they were shown the cultural exchange website specifically developed for this project (Appendix A). These pages detailed what was to happen throughout the project and provided the students with the name of their partners. Each student was asked to create an email for his/her American partner but only one computer had email access. It was necessary to collect these messages because of this limitation. These collected messages were then sent through the one computer that had Internet access. Students were also given disposable cameras and instructed to take pictures of their city and school to send to the American students. They took the cameras with them to be returned the next day.

On the third day, the Polish students completed the "Information Guide" worksheet and finished letters for their partners. They also brought in small gifts and returned the cameras with used film to the instructor to take back to the American students.

Upon returning to the United States, the instructor gave the Iowa students the letters and gifts from the Polish students. The Iowa students were asked to email their partners and ask specific questions to get better acquainted. Iowa students were also asked to give oral presentations based on the international reports they created. Lastly, two pre-service teachers from Poland visited the Iowa classroom and taught lessons about Poland. The Polish teachers spoke English but the classroom teacher had to interpret some of the terminology and help the students understand their accent.

Conclusion

All in all, this educator enjoyed working with both the Iowa and Polish students and felt that this exchange was a worthwhile experience for all involved. It helped the instructor learn the basics about setting up this type of project and provided contacts for future exchange opportunities. Projects such as this have endless possibilities in connecting high school students from other countries while gaining workplace skills such as email and communication techniques, seeking travel information, or working together on a joint project studying international business. All of these types of activities will enhance the students' ability to function in the global workforce. Andres (2000) feels that students need to be prepared for the "anytime-anyplace work environment...sophisticated communication skills, a flair for teamwork, respect for diversity, and a talent for ad hoc decision-making" (p. 42). These are all skills that a cultural collaboration project can provide.

This instructor found that both groups of students enjoyed meeting with the foreign teachers and the teachers enjoyed answering the students' questions. In addition, some of the images the students had about the other country were put into perspective as they realized that people are basically the same no matter where they live. This experience did allow the Iowa students to think beyond Iowa and realize the ease of communication today through the use of email and computers. These students focused more on what they were writing when they realized it was a real experience and not just an exercise. All of the students came away with a positive opinion about foreign countries and a more realistic view of what the world is really like outside of their own country. Although these students were a little sad that the communication did not develop further, this teacher believes that they would welcome the opportunity to try this type of experience again.

The author found this project to be very frustrating because student Internet access in Poland was unreliable and there was no way to provide follow up from the Polish students. Polish students seemed very excited but did not continue the communication with the American students after the American teacher returned. One possible explanation for this is the fact that there were no consequences for the Polish students who did not reply, as there was no instructor that was really involved on the Polish side.

Also, one limitation was the fact that the Polish students who participated in this project did not know about their involvement prior to the teacher's visit to Poland. They did not have a Polish teacher to help them learn about culture and

about communicating with other students. If the Polish students had been selected in advance, this would have allowed time for all the students to exchange emails before the American teacher ventured to Poland.

Recommendations

This author's recommendations for future Cultural Exchange projects include:

- Select schools that have Internet and email access readily available
- Have instructors in both countries work together to create lessons and a calendar of events
- Use a program such as WebCT to allow for teacher monitoring, discussion boards, private email, and heightened security for the students involved
- Develop graded assignments for all students
- Initiate and enhance partner communication before an instructor's trip
- Expand the project through the inclusion of travel information, i.e. how to get flights, distance, currency exchange rates, setting up lodging
- Follow Kroonenberg's (1994/1995) suggestion, " find a colleague who wishes to undertake the same endeavor" (p. 27) as it makes it easier to set up communication and work through the problems.

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Appendix A

Cultural Exchange Website

Cultural Exchange Project

Poland, the Netherlands, & the United States



[Home Page](#) | [Teams](#) | [Iowa](#) | [Poland](#) | [the Netherlands](#)

UNI | UAM

[Home](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Goals and Objectives](#)

[Lessons](#)

[Participants](#)

[East High School Website](#)

[Streszczenie w języku polskim](#)

East High School Students and Teacher



University of Northern Iowa
February, 2001

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Cultural Exchange Project

Poland, the Netherlands, & the United States



[Home Page](#) | [Teams](#) | [Iowa](#) | [Poland](#) | [the Netherlands](#)

UNI | UAM

[Home](#)

High School Project

[Introduction](#)

[Streszczenie w języku polskim](#)

[Goals and Objectives](#)

This project is designed to foster communication between high school students from around the world. These students will be participating in email exchanges, video transfers, in-class discussions, and group discussions.

[Lessons](#)

[Participants](#)

[East High School Website](#)

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Cultural Exchange Project

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UNI | UAM

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Goals and Objectives

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[Streszczenie w języku polskim](#)

[Goals and Objectives](#)

Goals

[Lessons](#)

- Goal #1: To promote cultural awareness
- Goal #2: To enhance technological skills
- Goal #3: To increase reading and writing abilities

[Participants](#)

[East High School Website](#)

Objectives

- Objective #1: Students will develop an understanding of cultural differences.
- Objective #2: Students will become proficient at computer usage.
- Objective #3: Students will be able to work within webct and use email.
- Objective #4: Students will improve reading and writing abilities through communication with peers.

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Cultural Exchange Project

Poland, the Netherlands, & the United States



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[East High School Website](#)

Lesson #1: United States students created a video to show to European students. Each student talked a little about him or herself and then explained what they felt culture was. European students will be doing the same when Mrs. Winters is in the Polish classroom.

Lesson #2: United States students have been communicating through email with each other and the teacher. This was started to develop students online communication skills. Students were taught the rules of netiquette and reminded about appropriate writing.

Lesson #3: Bring a small item showing something about you or your culture to send your Polish partner.

Lesson #4: Write a paragraph to your partner in Poland describing yourself and take pictures of your school. United States students will complete this before the trip. Polish students will complete this with Mrs. Winters.

Lesson #5: Complete the culture activity/worksheet in small groups and define what culture means to your class. United States students will complete before trip and Polish will complete with Mrs. Winters.

Lesson #6: United States students - while Mrs. Winters is visiting Europe, reply to her email and explain how you are progressing with your research paper.

Poland

Day 1: Watch video from United States students and have discussion about American students and schools. Ask Polish students to bring a small item to send to their partner in the United States.

Day 2: Polish students write a paragraph about self and take pictures of school.

Day 3: Videotape Polish student introductions, complete culture activity/worksheet, and define culture as a class.

Iowa

Lesson #7: Upon return, United States students will view the videotape of Polish students and read their introductions.

Lesson #8: Correspondence between students.

Cultural Exchange Project

Poland, the Netherlands, & the United States



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Participants

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University of Northern Iowa participants:

[Lessons](#)

- [Devon Winters](#) - Team Leader - graduate student & East High School Teacher
- Steve Winters - graduate student & East High School Teacher
- Abby Dean - graduate student

[Participants](#)

[East High School Website](#)

United States	Poland
1. Alandrea Smith	1. Jakub Stachowiak
2. Terrell Gray	2. Janusz Stryczniewicz
3. Zavion Harris	3. Marcin Soniewicki
4. Heather Monter	4. Otylia Danielewicz
5. Duane Helmers	5. Paulina Heryng
6. Tyler Coan	6. Adam Biskupski
7. Cordell Maar	7. Tomasz Batko
8. Jaime Rote	8. Maciej Kolecki
9. Joey Menuey	9. Filip Ciolkowiak
10. Kristia Rigdon	10. Lukasz Radomski
11. Rachel Leavell	11. Micha3 Klobus
12. Jennifer Aultman	12. Bartek Pietralik
13. Felicia Carey	13. Lukasz Szymanski
14. Eric Gleason	14. Ania Krych
15. Lyndsy Hagen	15. Grzegorz Maniak
16. Melissa Miller	16. Janusz Noszczyński
17. Mary Anderson	17. Tomasz Dlużyński
18. Brandon Ross	18. Piotr Scheibe
19. Shane Satterlee	19. Lukasz Szkudlarek
20. LaToya Johnson	20. Kasia Kozłowska
21. San Yim	21. Przemek Wallas
22. Aaron Driscoll	22. Basia Gramowska
23. Mark Miller	23. Agata Daleszyna
24. Kerry Digmann	24. Maciej Gorny
25. Aaron Hyde	25. Szymon Kubiak
26. Mandy Krusemark	26. Pawel Blazejewicz
27. Earnesha Bell	27. Bartosz Szczyrba

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February, 2001

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Appendix B
Information Guide

Name _____

Class: _____

INFORMATION GUIDE FOR FOREIGN STUDENTS VISITING OUR CITY

1. The best restaurant in our city is: _____.
2. The favorite food of the majority of people in our group is _____.
3. Most of us in our group participate in _____ (after school activity).
4. In our leisure time, most of us prefer to _____.
5. In order to be popular in our school, you must _____.
6. Above all else, the people in our group value freedom of _____.
7. The majority of our group likes _____ music best.
8. The greatest luxury item we would like to own is _____.
9. After high school, most of us will _____.
10. If we played an instrument, most of us would prefer to play _____.
11. Most of us eat _____ (how many) meals a day.
12. If we could speak another language fluently, most of us in the group would choose to speak _____.
13. The majority of people would name _____ as the best President or leader of our country.
14. To obtain luxuries in our country, you have to _____.
15. Most of us in the group would name _____ as our favorite actress.
16. Most of us in the group would name _____ as our favorite actor.
17. A country that most of us in the group would like to visit is _____.
18. Most of us would name _____ as our favorite sport to play.

19. Most of us in the group would name _____ as our favorite sport to watch.
20. If we get married, the majority of us will do so by the time we are _____ years old.
21. A majority of us feels that the _____ in our society should be treated more fairly.
22. Most of us have at least one _____ in our homes.
23. The average number of children in our families is _____.
24. A current fashion trend in our school is _____.
25. Our favorite holiday is _____.
26. In our group, _____ percent of us have jobs.
27. In our group, _____ is the favorite music artist.
28. Most of our group members have _____ (what type) as pets.
29. The group member's ages range from _____ years old.
30. Our school day goes from _____ to _____ each day.

Write anything else that you feel is important about your culture or group. Or anything that you would want to know about their culture.

Appendix C

Iowa High School iMovie





Mrs. Winters
Computer Applications



CAST **WIG**



WRESTLING

Hope you enjoyed your tour
and meeting our students.

Appendix D
Polish High School iMovie







Appendix E

Parental Consent Form

Dear Parent or Guardian:

Beginning in the middle of February, Mrs. Winters' sixth period Computer Application students will begin a project using the Internet to communicate with children in Poland and possibly the Netherlands. The students from Iowa and Europe will exchange ideas about culture and school experiences.

This project is a joint venture between East High School, the University of Northern Iowa (faculty and students) and partner schools overseas. The group from UNI (including Mrs. Winters) will visit the school and meet with the students in Poland and the Netherlands in March. We will be sharing videos, pictures, and other items from East High School students and in return will bring the same sort of information back to share with the East High students. The communications between the two schools will continue through April. In early April, visitors from Poland (students and faculty members) will visit East High School as part of the exchange.

An Internet site will be established through the University of Northern Iowa that will allow for secure Internet usage. This Internet password protected site will be used for communication between the students:

- Email will be available so students can exchange mail with Email Pen Pals.
- An electronic bulletin board will be available for the students to post questions and discussions about topics that are important to them.
- A photo gallery will exist where students can post digital/scanned pictures to share with each other. (Pictures will be posted without names to provide privacy and protection for students.)

We want you to be aware of what your child will be doing in the project. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Mrs. Winters at 291-4829 or you may email me at dwinters@waterloo.k12.ia.us Please sign the permission form attached and return it to Mrs. Winters by February 12, 2001.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Devon Winters
Business Education Instructor

Please detach and return by February 16, 2001 to Mrs. Winters.

By signing this form, I (the parent or guardian) certify that I give permission for

_____ to participate in the Cultural Exchange Project between East High School, the University of Northern Iowa, and European schools.

Parent or Guardian Signature(s) _____

Date _____

Phone _____