



Seven Steps to Successful Online Learning Communities

By Maureen Brown Yoder

Subject: Learning communities,
telecomputing projects

Audience: Teachers, library media
specialists, teacher educators

Grade Level: K-12 (Ages 5-18)

Technology: Internet/Web, e-mail

Standards: *NETS-S 4-5, NETS-T II*
(www.iste.org/standards)

Undoubtedly, you've had times during your career when you created magic in your classroom and brought out the absolute best in your students as they worked together cooperatively and collaboratively. You provided guidelines and feedback as they learned to work as a team. You helped them respect each other's opinions while feeling confident about their own beliefs.

For your efforts, you're rewarded with moments that reaffirm your decision to become a teacher. It can happen when kindergarten students take a bow as their beaming parents applaud their musical or when older students continue a lively class discussion as they leave class and walk down the hall. These are learning communities at work.

Chances are, these events occurred in traditional schools, with walls, desks, computers, and chalkboards. However, learning communities are no longer bound by physical limitations. The Internet empowered teachers and students with the means to connect and collaborate, regardless of geographic location or time of day. An online community may evolve locally because one or more students are absent from school or a home-schooled child wants to connect with other students the same age. In a larger, global context, students can communicate online with experts and celebrities, authors and scientists, and other students and teachers.

Preparing for Online Communication

If students are comfortable with and skilled at communicating online, they will be better prepared for the opportunities they will have later on. *Technology Counts 2002: E-Defining Education* shows that distant learning classes are increasing. Thirty-two U.S. states have e-learning initiatives, and 17 states have, or are planning to have, online high school programs. Offerings for middle and elementary schools are in-

creasing. Our students' future includes virtual work environments with an increased number of online collaboration possibilities.

How can you help your students become involved and productive online? How can they avoid being misunderstood? How does a true feeling of community develop? Communities develop when students work together toward a common goal and begin to care about each other's curricular interests and personal goals. This article provides guidelines for asynchronous discussion forums and online collaborative projects used to extend the traditional classroom environment. The following seven strategies should assist you in providing your students with a high-quality online communication experience:

1. Begin with Curriculum
2. Spend Time Planning
3. Encourage a Positive Social Climate
4. Understand the Unique Nature of Online Communication
5. Encourage Good Reading and Writing Skills
6. Deal with Inappropriate Behavior and Attitudes
7. Use Effective Facilitation Skills

1. Begin with Curriculum. The focus should be on how telecollaboration will enhance existing curriculum goals, not on the technology itself. A project designed primarily to teach students how to use Netscape would not be as effective as one intended to extend a unit on exploration by putting students in touch with a team retracing Columbus's route to the New World, for example. ColumbusQuest is one of many adventures that provide students with real-world experiences and online communication with people taking on interesting, and sometimes dangerous, challenges. Netscape skills must be understood by students in order to participate in ColumbusQuest, but they are a means to an end, rather than the primary goal. (*Editor's note:* See Resources on p. 21 for the ColumbusQuest URL and other project ideas.)

The rationale for using technology to enhance the curriculum should be stated clearly. Administrative support is a key ingredient to successful online projects and a convincing argument will help justify the funding for the necessary resources. Reliable Internet connections are essential along with professional development, technical assistance, and planning time. These needs should always be connected to the districtwide curriculum and to the larger goal of enhancing student learning.

2. Spend Time Planning. *L&L's* long-time Mining the Internet columnist Judi Harris (1999, 2000, 2002) has outlined the steps to take and the challenges that teachers face when attempting online collaboration. A shared vision of the goals of the project among teachers and administrators will increase the chances that participants will be invested. Just as we expect our students to work together, the planning of an online project should be a collaborative effort, with teachers and administrators involved in the discussion and consensus building. Not every teacher can be involved with every step of the planning process, but a project coordinator (often an invested teacher) can keep everyone informed, particularly about the project's timeline and deadlines. The coordinator can send reminders and provide support when needed to help keep the project moving.

Don't underestimate the time the project will take. Factor in school vacations and other possible interruptions in the schedule. Be realistic.

3. Encourage a Positive Social Climate. Those new to an electronic environment can find it unsettling. You and your students are used to seeing facial expressions that help determine whether someone understands. How can you foster a supportive, productive online learning community when your vehicle of communication is primarily the printed word?

In an online setting, familiarity and trust can develop, but it requires structure and a meaningful purpose. Teachers must be determined to make sure that students' personal as well as academic interests are acknowledged and that student interaction is encouraged. If the project is a pen pal type of activity, many teachers, with their students, put together lists of standard questions or develop an essay question for the other class that elicits a creative, imaginative answer. To stimulate the routine use of e-mail, an activity may require each student to write to a specific number of students and respond to a required number. For a whole class activity, students may work together to create a written portrait of their school, or their town, to be shared with a previously chosen online class. Illustrations or photographs can further enhance the portrait. Even with these preliminary activities, though, teachers have found that e-mail communication will not sustain a project unless a more substantial goal is inherent.

After the initial acquaintance stage, a need for social interaction remains, alongside the more serious, academic communication. A separate online forum can be designated as a place where students discuss informal topics. The Student Lounge, The Hallway, and The Mall are typical names. The teacher, or a student monitor, watches for inappropriate conversation such as hurtful gossip. The teacher's involvement varies, depending on the behavior and experience of the students. Some teachers make only an occasional "visit," designating the area for informal conversation among students. Students tend to band together during difficult times, such as when a local or national tragedy occurs, and talk openly about their feelings, but day to day interactions also help develop friendships and trust.

4. Understand the Unique Nature of Online Communication. In a traditional discussion, your tone of voice can convey emotions such as compassion, amusement, or anger. Teachers and students use visual and auditory clues to interpret meaning from what their peers say and do.

Online, consideration should be given to how written words come across to the reader, and how they express feelings accurately. *Emoticons*, such as :) for a happy face, are facial expressions created with text. They can sometimes help represent feelings, but there is no substitute for precise language. Students should be required to have the teacher or a classmate read what they have prepared, to ensure that their message will not be misinterpreted.

The online version of etiquette is called *netiquette*. The first rule on the

Netiquette Home Page is "Remember the Human." It also includes a cyberspace version of The Golden Rule. Adults and students need to remember that although what they see are letters on a screen, people with feelings and emotions are on the other end.

Making certain that e-mail messages are concise and informative is another way to be considerate online and to promote effective communication. An example is referring to previous e-mail messages. Receiving a message that just reads, "Yes, go ahead," may be a frustrating experience if you don't remember what you had asked. With most e-mail programs, you can choose to include the original message when you reply, which gives the reader a context (Figure 1). You can also refer to the topic in your message. Students should be taught these conventions.

Often the most help you can provide is to intervene very little, merely asking a probing question or sharing a relevant story that will help refocus the discussion or encourage the participants to think more seriously about the topic.

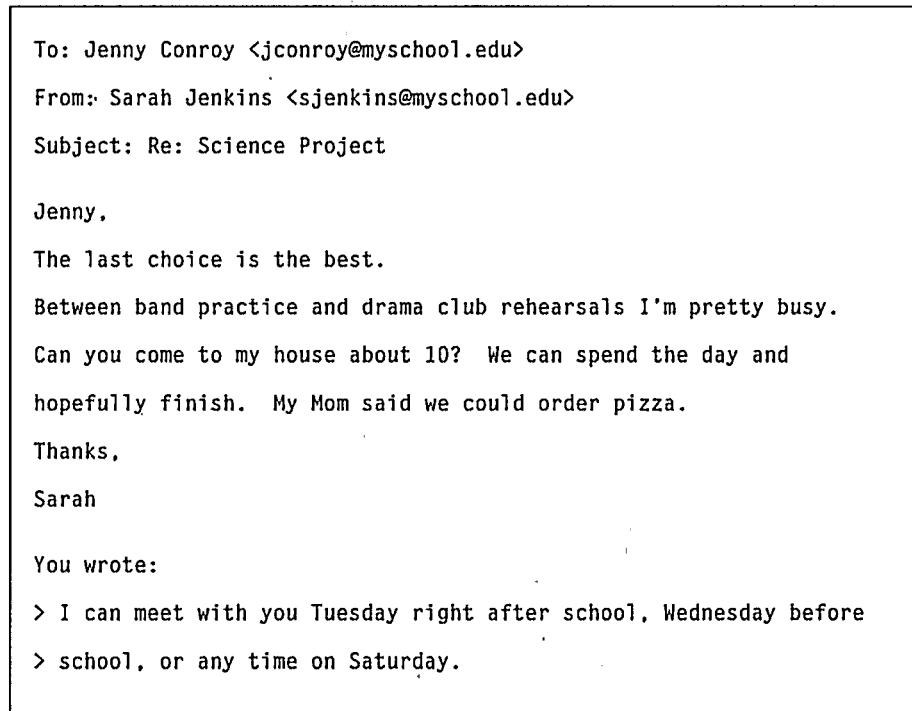


Figure 1. A sample e-mail showing how you can include the original message to which you are replying.

5. Encourage Good Reading and Writing Skills. In a traditional classroom, helping a group of students to really listen to each other, without interrupting, and to understand a different or opposing viewpoint can be the key to a productive dialogue. The following observations and suggestions will help you promote discussion participation and encourage thorough reading and good writing.

In an asynchronous online discussion, taking turns is inherent in the format. Rather than listening intently when others speak, participants must carefully read what has been written. They can read it at their own pace, without another speaker's interruption, and reread it as needed. Another advantage of an online format is that there is time for writers to gather their thoughts, carefully word their replies, and edit those until they convey exactly what they want to express.

Students with better writing skills will have an advantage over students who are less confident or less skilled writers. Students whose ability to write precludes them from participating fully and effectively will need assistance. They may be inspired to improve their writing because communication with their peers is more motivating than communication with only the teacher.

In an online discussion, you and your students only see what participants write. As a teacher, you can observe the content, tone, quantity, and frequency of contributions by your own students as well as those of students participating in a collaborative activity. Look for the teachable moment that a confusing incoming e-mail could provide for a discussion of the importance of clarity and how writing can be improved.

6. Deal with Inappropriate Behavior and Attitudes. In a traditional classroom, bullying, bad language, or a generally bad attitude can affect every

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student in the class, but it can be identified quickly and addressed. A good teacher observes individual students and group dynamics and can often address problems before they escalate.

In an online discussion, bad behavior emerges in the written form. Sometimes, if noticed quickly, an offensive posting can be removed, the author alerted, and his or her behavior addressed. Some students may not even realize that what they have written, or how they have written it, has offended someone. For example, typing an e-mail message in capital letters signifies shouting or anger. Many of the commercial collaborative projects have their own rules for appropriate behavior, but it is essential that you also provide guidelines.

Private communication from the teacher, in person or by e-mail, is more effective in dealing with individual behaviors than a posting to the entire group. Publicly complimenting a student for positive behavior and good contributions in an online forum is not recommended because other students can become intimidated or feel they must model their contributions after the "good" student rather than follow their own instincts.

7. Use Effective Facilitation Skills. In a traditional classroom discussion, the teacher needs to carefully listen to what is being said. Online, the teacher must read the written contributions and decide how and when to intervene. "Listening" remains the key.

The authors of *Facilitating Online Learning* (Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000), discuss the strategies that the online moderator can use, "to focus and move a discussion forward." (p. xv) They indicate that effective strategies can be learned, and they have formulated detailed and useful guide-

lines for effective facilitation. Knowing how and when to intervene is critical. Using a variety of voices and tones, the facilitator can take on the role of "guide on the side" and carefully craft an intervention that targets an obvious tension, an unresolved issue, or a gap in the thinking of the group. It is critical that the facilitator is not the center of attention, and a good facilitator encourages others to take on leadership roles. George Collison, co-author of *Facilitating Online Learning* (Collison et al.), indicates that a good facilitator is not the life of the party but a very good host.

Effective online facilitation begins with observing your students and thinking about what guidance they need from you. Often the most help you can provide is to intervene very little, merely asking a probing question or sharing a relevant story that will help refocus the discussion or encourage the participants to think more seriously about the topic.

Getting Started

A short-term collaborative project or online discussion with nearby students is a good choice for a first online activity.

Collaborate with Another School.

Before attempting to collaborate with a classroom far away, you may want to begin with one in your district. You have the advantage of being able to meet with the other teacher, compare notes, and develop strategies together.

It could be a collaborative writing exercise or a joint planning effort for an upcoming event. Your first steps could be meeting with the other teacher and discussing the project with your students. Decide on the goal, and how you will go about achieving it. Having deadlines and schedules will keep the activity moving along.

A Long-Term Discussion. For this activity, you will need access to an online threaded discussion area. It is an area where topics are introduced and people respond. Reactions are posted, and the thread continues. Unlike e-mail, the postings are public. Every person in the conference area can see what everyone else has previously posted.

The discussion could be about what to do for Class Day at the end of the year or how to use the money collected during a fundraiser. Set a time when the activity will draw to a close so that students can reflect on the postings and come to some conclusions.

This activity will provide a chance for you to test out your role as the facilitator. You will have an opportunity to jump-start the discussion if it begins to fade or intervene if it wanders off the topic.

Finding Additional Projects

Larger, commercial projects have been well planned by professional scientists, historians, and educators. Detailed curriculum ideas and resources are usually available online and in print form. There is still a need for careful planning, attention to deadlines, and monitoring of e-mail, no matter which type of project you choose.

A Shared Adventure. Many large, ongoing projects are available. Experiences that would be too expensive, time consuming, and dangerous for class field trips are possible virtually. One possibility is to take part in a scientific exploration or to visit a foreign country.

With satellite technology, adventurous people can exchange e-mail with students back in their classrooms. Classrooms have followed research groups on ocean voyages, to mountain tops, and on excursions into many remote locations. ColumbusQuest, MayaQuest, and AfricaQuest West are

among the past and current quests sponsored by Classroom Connect. The Jason Foundation XIV From Shore to Sea engages students in a journey to explore the Channel Islands and the coast of California studying the marine and terrestrial ecosystems, methods of scientific research, and native cultures.

A Timely Issue. An environmental, political, or social issue is often the reason people get together for an online discussion. For example, Earth Day is an annual international event scheduled next on April 22, 2003. The Earth Day Network provides suggestions for raising awareness about clean energy, alternative transportation, and being a good global citizen. Millions of people worldwide will participate, and information on joining international environmental projects is available.

Need for Support. Sometimes tragedies create a need for connecting to others and a desire for information about how to cope. In the aftermath of such tragedies as the shootings at Columbine (Colorado) High School and the attack on the World Trade Center, September 11, there was an enormous sharing of resources to help deal with feelings of fear and loss. People came together online for support and comfort, to raise money for the victims. Sites were developed specifically for helping young people. Some of them continued and developed into learning communities where members explored conflict resolution strategies and other strategies for peaceful outcomes of difficult situations.

International Projects. The Teachers Guide to International Collaboration on the Internet provides detailed information about collaborative projects for students ages 5–19. For one project, classrooms can partner with a Peace Corps volunteer and receive information about the projects they are work-

ing on. Learning Circles, organized by iEARN, are 14-week, project-based partnerships among schools throughout the world. Classes can participate in existing activities or propose their own. Playwriting in the Round is a progressive scriptwriting circle, organized by Telecollaborate! Students collaboratively write scripts for four mystery plays.

Summing Up

Although the most important aspects of community building are the interpersonal skills that humans bring, technology can provide the opportunity to organize, edit, and archive the postings of participants. Easy-to-use documentation and technical support also help participants get beyond the technical challenges to focus on the process of community building.

The less intrusive the technology, the more the students can concentrate on the project at hand. Technology glitches get in the way of free expression, and equipment failure can result in a total breakdown in communication. Therefore, reliability is extremely important. (*Editor's note:* See Resources on p. 21 for conference systems.)

The Internet is widely known for its vast amounts of information, but it also serves as a conduit to bring people together. Distance is no longer a barrier to K–12 students sharing experiences and combining talents. A new kind of learning is possible, one that engages students in real-world challenges and group problem solving with students from around the world.

As an educator, you have developed techniques to help your students collaborate on class projects and, ultimately, become better citizens. By transforming your moderating techniques to the online environment and exploring the resources included in this article, you can help your students effectively communicate in an online format. You will be preparing them for a future with the capability to connect with others in increasingly sophisticated

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ways and with access to technological learning opportunities that we can only imagine.

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- Salmon, G. (2000). *E-moderating: The key to teaching and learning online*. Sterling, VA: Kogan Page.

Conference Systems

- Blackboard: www.blackboard.com
- WebCT: www.Webct.com
- Yahoo Groups: <http://groups.yahoo.com>

Online Communities

- The Beginning Teachers Toolbox:
www.inspiringteachers.com/community
- Busy Teacher's Web site:
www.ceismc.gatech.edu/busy/

CoSN (Consortium for School Networking):
www.cosn.org/

Scholastic's Professional Discussion Groups:
<http://scholastic.ehosts.net/eshare/server?action=4>

Tapped In: www.tappedin.org

Teaching.com: www.teaching.com

TeachNet: www.teachnet.org/BBS/bbsindex.htm

Online Forums and Projects

- Blue Web'n: www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/bluwebn
- Classroom Connect Community:
www.classroom.com/community/neighborhoods
- Classroom Connect: The Quest Channel:
<http://quest.classroom.com>
- CoNect Teleprojects: <http://exchange.co-nect.com/Teleprojects>
- Earth Day Network: www.earthday.net
- ePALS Classroom Exchange: www.epals.com
- Global Schoolhouse: www.gsn.org
- iEARN Learning Circles: www.iearn.org/circles
- Jason Foundation: www.jason.org
- Kidlink: www.kidlink.org
- Netiquette Home Page: www.albion.com/netiquette
- Teacher's Guide to International Collaboration on the Internet Resources for Cross-cultural Interaction and Project Work (U.S. Department of Education): www.ed.gov/Technology/guide/international/resources.html
- Telecollaborate!: <http://telecollaborate.net>
- Thirteen: WNET New York Dealing with Tragedy: Tips and Resources for Teachers and Parents: www.thirteen.org/teach/tips.html
- Web66 International Registry of Schools on the Web: <http://Web66.coled.umn.edu>



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Maureen spent 15 years in public schools teaching K-12. She became involved with computers in 1981 and used Instant Logo with her kindergartners. She continued to see the potential for learning with technology while working as a middle school computer specialist.



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SOURCE: Learn Lead Technol 30 no6 Mr 2003
WN: 0306004947002

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