

Chapter XIV

Back to Basics: Electronic Collaboration in the Education Sector

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ABSTRACT

Communication technology, which is not constrained by geographical boundaries, has increasingly resulted in faster and more efficient ways to maintain contact. When utilising electronic technology in the classroom it is essential for teachers to respect cultural differences and instil the importance of basic communication skills to their students. Many school students are extremely comfortable in using developing technologies, but are unaware of the equally important need to establish relationships to enhance the quality of information they are exchanging. Electronic communication is a necessary part of developing the skills of a lifelong learner. These forms of communication have encouraged processes such as collaboration to occur by creating exciting synergies between people and resources that may have not been previously possible. This chapter will explore several examples of how schools and teachers are using the Internet to collaborate and share ideas and resources between staff and students.

INTRODUCTION

At no other time in human history have humans been able to communicate as freely or as widely

as they now do in the digital age. Because of its ability to speed up communication processes, as well as its inclusion in many diverse areas, technology has increasingly become an important

element in many collaborative processes. Many of the traditional tools used to collaborate, such as phone calls, letters, and personal conversations are time consuming, and at times, inappropriate for the speed of communication required. Most areas of our modern life are affected by digital technology from global positioning systems (GPS) in vehicles, which help us find our way, through to mobile telephones that allow us to communicate anywhere and anytime. This pervasive and rapidly developing technology gives us rapid and easy access to information. Technology has enabled people to meet regionally, nationally, and internationally through the technology of video-conferencing, which allows them to interact in real time (synchronous communication). The rapidity and frequency of this type of communication, however, presents new challenges to society's values. As technology develops, it is necessary to develop or recontextualise laws, policies, personal skills and attitudes to foster its desirable aspects and mitigate its undesirable aspects.

Digital technology—specifically computers, the World Wide Web (Web or WWW), and the Internet—are reshaping communication processes. Geographical boundaries, which belong to the traditional era of communication, are becoming less important as technology pervades the globe. The rapid and pervasive nature of technology means that communication across the globe can be as instantaneous as face-to-face communication. Therefore, digital communication, which can occur globally or in the local classroom, conveys cultural and ethical values and meanings. These need to be understood and respected by school students if they are to be purposeful and productive users of digital technologies. In recognising these changes, it is important for the education sector not to see global changes only insofar as they affect local change. It is imperative for the education sector to recognise how electronic information can be used to provide greater depth and breadth to the process of learning in a global context. An important concept underpinning the effective use of digital technologies is *communica-*

tion and *collaboration*. In this chapter, the term collaboration refers to a pervasive relationship in which all parties are fully committed to a common goal. This chapter aims to highlight current practice and research as it pertains to digital communication in education, and along the way to stimulate thought on the topic of synergy and educational collaboration.

Collaboration

The term collaboration has been generally considered to be a process engaged in by more than two people; but this is where general agreement of the meaning ends and misuse of the term begins. Many people purport to work collaboratively when in fact the process is more cooperative, meaning there is less personal and financial risk (White & O'Brien, 1999; Winer & Ray, 2000). Engaging in a collaborative process is about embarking on a relationship which relies on the positive aspects of human nature to work effectively. Although there are many texts, particularly in management or business which describe group work strategies (Brown, 1991; Chalmers, 1992; DuBrin, 1997; McDermott, 2002; Reed & Garvin, 1983; Toseland & Rivas, 1998), it has been only recently that the human aspect of working together has been emphasised (Barrentine, 1993; Buzzanell, 1994; Clift, Veal, Holland, Johnson, & McCarthy, 1995; Farrell, 2001; John-Steiner, 2000; Paulus & Nijstad, 2003; Rosener, 1990; Rost, 1991; Winer & Ray, 2000). For the purpose of this chapter, the word *collaboration* is defined as a durable, intense and pervasive relationship which is built up over time. People who collaborate are fully committed to the relationship, and there are well-defined communication channels which operate on all levels.

Communication

Communication is such a basic, and perhaps fundamental, element that it is often a process that is taken for granted. As humans, we communicate in

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