Chapter 16
Building Bridges Online:
Issues of Pedagogy and Learning Out-comes in Intercultural Education Through Citizenship

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ABSTRACT

This article indicates that there are four key drivers for school-based use of collaborative software;

a. *The speed at which 'social software' has been taken up by young people outside school which has led some educationists to review the potential of such software in more formal school settings.*
b. *Helping pupils to develop 'knowledge construction skills' which are relevant to a knowledge economy.*
c. *Enabling more pupils to access a wider curriculum.*
d. *The promotion of inter-cultural education through citizenship.*

In the case of the fourth driver, the article examines in detail the research basis for extending the concept of the 'contact hypothesis' through communication technology. It uses evidence to show that well managed on-line collaboration between school-based students can be a powerful vehicle for intercultural education through citizenship.

INTRODUCTION

While there has been extensive research on the role of information and communication technology (ICT) in collaborative learning, there has been relatively little work that explores where ICT has been used explicitly to promote inter-cultural education or citizenship. In a review of recent research on the role of ICT in a range of learning settings, Hartley (2007) refers to what he calls "widening horizons." He comments on one positive account of e-mail used to link students from two geographically-separated primary schools (Ho, 2000). But, he notes that in Fabos and Young (1999), reviews of over a dozen different studies find more limitations. Indeed, they concluded that much of the research was contradictory, inconclusive, and possibly misleading because of its overoptimistic tone.

This article sets out to challenge this somewhat outdated and pessimistic view of the role of ICT in citizenship by referring to a range of international research which has been published since 2001. The authors set out to establish a consensus on the learning gains which arise from well-managed school links and argue that enough is now known about the conditions for success in "e-partnerships" between schools for "e-twinning" to be raised to a level of expectation for all schools. Given the support that is now available from the European Community to promote "e-twinning," the opportune moment for a critical review of learning outcomes that ICT can deliver as well as the conditions likely to enable collaborative learning to emerge may be at hand.

THE DRIVE TOWARDS COLLABORATIVE WORKING ONLINE

In seeking to explain the significant increase in the use of collaborative software in schools, three "drivers" are proposed. First, the explosion of what Shirky (2003) calls "social software" enabling group communication through social networking has become so prevalent among teenagers and adults (Grant, 2006) that there is, among innovators in the education sector, recognition of the potential for such software in schooling. At the same time, however, negative press coverage surrounding the misuse of social environments leading to cyber-bullying and child abuse creates an environment less supportive of spreading these innovative educational applications.

The second reason for an increased interest in social software arises from a combination of declining student numbers in schools coinciding with pressure on schools to provide a wider and more varied curriculum. School administrators are facing difficult choices about how they can sustain schools, particularly in rural communities and where there are falling enrollments. In Northern Ireland, the Costello report (2004) on post-primary reorganisation claims that e-learning has the potential to make "a major contribution to local partnerships of schools, which could make it possible to provide courses for small groups that would not otherwise be viable". The report calls for further investment in facilities and teacher training "so that they (the teachers) are comfortable with the issues related to teaching in this way" and a development path with clear targets for e-learning emerges to secure significant gains as soon as possible.

It is recognised that technology can have a significant role to play in broadening choice through the online delivery of distance learning to courses traditionally delivered face-to-face to a single class gathered in one room. To reduce the need for learners to travel between school sites during the school day, online technology can support collaboration through the communication tools of text-conferencing, audio and video conferencing, and applications-sharing. And, schools will need open access computer-resource study areas for learners who come and go throughout an extended day.

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