Online Community—Connections of the Mind and Heart
Interdisciplinary Projects Conducted by Moanalua and Molokai High School and Osaka Gakuin University

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Abstract: Studies have shown that smaller learning communities increase student engagement and personalization. With the increased capability of and access to online communication, online learning communities may have the potential to provide more meaningful learning experiences at the high school and college level. Two years of project work in an international, interdisciplinary online learning community have resulted in students attaining depth in their thematic studies as well as finding more meaningful connections of these themes to their own lives and to the ideas and lives of their peers.

Purpose

The exponential progress in technology and online access within the K20 community has resulted in educators and educational institutions searching for the best way to realize the potential of this progress and access. At the same time, studies have shown the need for greater engagement and personalization of the learning environment, at both the high school and college level. And from the business community comes the mandate that students be able to work collaboratively with others. The online learning community may be the answer to these needs.

This paper will document the ongoing online professional collaboration of teachers from Osaka Gakuin University (OGU), Molokai High School (MHS), and Moanalua High School (MoHS), resulting in semester long collaborative projects and involving students in OGU Digital English, MHS Digital Media/Fine Arts, and MoHS Media

Communications Learning Center and Fine Arts programs. It will discuss the inquiry questions addressed by the project teachers: Can the online environment nurture authentic, rigorous, and engaging experiences for students in the K20 population? What are "best practices" in the design and implementation of projects that would effectively integrate online communications tools? And can an online learning community support teacher collaboration and professional inquiry?

Literature Review

Throughout the 1990s, many educational researchers and leaders focused their inquiry on the American high school and its inherent weaknesses in creating an environment that nurtured a culture of learning. The battle cry of school reform demanded rigor, relevance, and relationships from its curriculum, its educational practice, and its institutions. Numerous studies decried the bland and impersonal environment in which disengaged learners went unchallenged, content to settle for superficial and mediocre performance (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Falk, 1995; The Institute for Education in Transformation, 1992; Sizer, 1984; Goodlad, 1984 in Ancess, 2003, pp. 1-2).

Research based recommendations for school reform consistently include the establishment of smaller learning communities as an important element in increasing the success of schools (NASSP Breaking Ranks II, 2004; Wood, 1992; Ancess, 2003; Cotton, 1996). For Wood (1992, p. 76), the urgency of these recommendations goes beyond academics, beyond the world of the school:

> [We need]…young people with the habits of heart and mind that make democracy possible. Young people who can think carefully and clearly, who can understand the world around them in all its complexity, who can work together, and who have a desire to make a difference. To do this has meant changing the very environment of the schools, restructuring the experience of teachers as well as of students. It involves making room for communities to develop, for students to engage in real experiences, for connections to grow and develop, and for genuine engagement in the world outside the school.

As attention focused on this restructuring, the Internet and the online environment it generated were emerging as a possible place in which to build these learning communities. Visionaries such as Chris Dede (1995) and Margaret Riel (1996) have heralded the potential of technology, both to humanize the learning community and to serve as a catalyst for higher level thinking in the members of these online learning communities.

Dede (1995) characterized these communities, and learning itself, as "social as well as intellectual" and cautioned that technology alone, despite its potential for complex data gathering and analysis, cannot guarantee learning outcomes without the support of the learning community that is "constructing shared knowledge." Riel (1996) also

emphasized the social aspects of the online environment, as a place in which to develop new social constructs in which to work and learn.

The work of these thinkers and researchers forms the basis for our online community building.

Project Description

The three projects comprising this study involved twelve high school juniors and seniors enrolled in digital media classes at rural Molokai High School, forty freshmen and sophomores in a media communications learning center as well as ten upperclassmen enrolled in advanced art classes at Moanalua High School, on the outskirts of metropolitan Honolulu, and fifty third and fourth year university students at Osaka Gakuin University, located in one of the urban centers of Japan.

During the course of their collaboration, the project teachers sought to discover whether the online environment could nurture authentic, rigorous, and engaging experiences for students in the K20 population. They attempted to design, implement, and assess projects that would effectively integrate online communication tools. And they assessed their own evolving online learning community in its support of teacher collaboration and professional inquiry.

Each project began with teachers discussing the universal themes and essential questions that were to be the foundation of the units, engaging students in experiences meaningful to their own lives. Hawaii teachers addressed the Hawaii Content and Performance Standards, while their OGU counterpart focused on the needs of her EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students, as well as critical thinking materials from Drs. Richard Paul and Linda Elder at The Center for Critical Thinking.

For both Hawaii and OGU teachers, balancing depth and breadth with relevancy and connectedness was critical.

The Art and Memory project addressed the question "What does artistic expression, spanning time and place, reveal about humanity, conflict, and our future?" Students from all three schools explored the arts and history of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. The Molokai students expressed their feelings through art pieces that they studied and created while the Moanalua students researched and created PowerPoint presentations that documented the artistic expression during wars in our country's history. They delved into the poetry, marching songs, and monuments to combatants from the Civil War through the current conflict in Iraq. As a culmination, they created their own artistic response to war—an image, song or poem. The OGU students looked into the monuments and artifacts of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Peace Parks as well as narratives written by those who either survived the bombing or those who interpreted the war through poetry. The fact that many of the monuments are inscribed in both Japanese and English at the Peace Parks enabled them to share the literary beauty of the Japanese reading and the English translations.

Student participants in the MEdia and ME project sought to answer the question, "How does media impact my life?" and, with their classmates in Hawaii and Japan, to discover, "How are the experiences of teens in Japan and the US similar and different as far as media impact in their lives?" Online magazine articles about popular culture, read by both the Hawaii and Japan students, brought stimulating discussions and a barrage of questions. "Do students in your culture follow fads?" "Does media affect your life style and in what way?" And on a more serious note: "What is it like to live in a gun culture?" (asked of the US students by Japan) When the controversy over Japanese textbooks and subsequent violent demonstrations in China hit the media, students learned to become critical readers and thinkers and to face the issues of "perspective" and "effect of the media on public opinion" in an authentic context.

After the success of the first two projects, the teacher team began planning the next year with renewed enthusiasm. The 2005-2006 school year targeted a related set of essential questions that focused on making sense of the passage into adulthood and of the inexplicable in life. The team also sought to integrate other forms of artistic media more fully into the project inquiry. The essential questions were: "What are some universal elements of the passage to adulthood and of the inexplicable in life (death, the existence of evil, conflict, etc)?" and "How do the arts, their appreciation, communication, and creation, reflect and bring meaning to this process?"

The first semester's "Coming of Age" theme and related essential questions proved to be, perhaps, the most far reaching and relevant for our students. Since they are at the point where they are truly "Coming of Age," questions and comments poured out of all of the students. Their enthusiasm about "Coming of Age" brought out their creativity in varied, sophisticated, and intense ways through personally created art pieces, many of them truly symbolic, narratives and poetry that delved deep into students' emotions and values, and a greater understanding of and appreciation for cultural days set aside for the "Coming of Age," in Japan in January. The enthusiasm for this theme and the student dialogues inspired the technology staff at OGU to create a song and lyrics with collaborative input from the inter-school collaborative groups.

The visual arts element of the projects also added depth to the students' learning experience. The Hawaii Content and Performance Standards in the visual arts require students to understand how the arts are organized, how they communicate, and how they define culture. These collaborative projects required that students be able to creatively apply media, work with themes and symbolism, critique and analyze their own work and the work of others. It also emphasized connections to other content areas; all of which are essential outcomes for the visual arts standards. The success of the students' participation with this collaborative project became evidence that the student had met proficiency with the standards.

It was interesting to note that the initial response to the "Coming of Age" theme was freedom, but as students at all sites worked on deeper meaning, they focused on the responsibility that goes with that freedom. In all of the projects, students' shyness gave way to enthusiastic discussion and interaction the more they worked with each other. It

was a meaningful experience for students to interact with, and receive feedback from peers other than from those in class and for each student, in his or her own way, it was truly a "coming of age."

Just as the curricular elements of the project evolved through the collaboration and reflection of the teaching team, so, too, did the technology integration.

The development and refinement of videoconferencing technology set the stage for collaborations such as this. The progress made by Osaka Gakuin, as described by Koji Nakajima, Technology Coordinator, OGU, is a good example:

> *Back in the beginning of this new century, I remember that we installed a CODEC (Coder/Decoder) system, which was in the "H320" regulation. It worked well for having students communicate with the others over the ocean, but it cost so much because it was coming and going through ISDN lines. So we moved to the early technology of "H323" regulation like "Netmeeting." This was so easy to use through the Internet but the quality of the audio and the visual was quite low for not only one student to talk through the small screen and speakers.*
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> *But after we installed the CODEC system, which is available for "H323" regulation, things were changed incredibly. The high quality of the audio and the visual display was provided with the regular AV system. Also, it gives us the capability of a multi-point connection.*
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> *This means the technology allows students to forget about the technical set up. They can just enjoy communication and collaboration just like working with others in the next room.*

The videoconference format, however, was not the only technology used to support our online community. For each project we created a website where student introductions, photos, and projects could be showcased. Reflections on the themes and individual response and collaboration were conducted on forums created for each project. Students and teachers also used email to continue their shared learning.

For each of the themes, the technology integration served to heighten the authenticity of the experience. Students could see each other through the teleconferences and the forums where they introduced themselves through their photographs and short writings. They had an audience that they could see and talk to—live. Preparation took much work; however, because students were putting their personal selves forward to a real audience (and, in fact, an international one), it was meaningful. The format of 4-5 teleconferences throughout the semester enabled students to bring out their personhood to others, either individually or collaboratively. In the "Coming of Age" project, especially, students established relationships with their group members across the ocean through the various forums and through the teleconferences. Art and literary pieces, and group names were deeply appreciated, especially due to the relationships that students established with each

other and the ownership that groups had through the conversations. Student leaders and students learning from other learners emerged and became prominent. As for the teachers—we were truly coaches—guides on the side.

Results

From quantitative results like completion rate of project assignments and depth of student answers to the essential questions, it appears that online collaboration can provide rigorous and meaningful learning for students. For the MoHS media learning center students, completion rates for the project culminating activities were between 80-100%. For the initial activities, which usually involved writing an introductory piece and creating a symbolic graphic, the completion rate was 100%. Perhaps more dramatic evidence is the fact that, because of time zone differences, all of the project videoconferences took place after school for Hawaii. Thus, Moanalua and Molokai student attendance, which remained high throughout the projects, was on a totally voluntary basis!

Beyond participation and completion data is the rigor and depth evidenced in the student products and reflections.

Here, a student responds on the MEdia and ME forum, reflecting on the role media plays and the deepened understanding she has gained about that role because of the international element to the study:

> *Media coverage affects the way we view our world and possibly the way others view our society, by making us opinionated, or sometimes just affects us personally. After talking to our friends in Osaka, Japan, they talked about the War in Iraq. The rest of the world doesn't like that we are in war with them, I agree. Sometimes media coverage will affect us like that. Even, America's crimes, the way media presents these issues might give the world the impression that we have too much to freedom, and we are out of control.*

Students in the Coming of Age project addressed their essential questions by reflecting on the various "team galleries" that showcased art and poetry created by the participants:

> *Gallery 2 was interesting as Kayla's artwork was more nature oriented. Stephanie's artwork showed the outcome or future of what it is like the be mature and Chelsea's poem was very expressive of how we go through the stages of our life but still return back to where we had started from. Naoko's haiku was also thought provoking and very deep on how we should keep moving forward into the future.*
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> *I felt similarly about the pictures depicting the future when we mature and no matter how old we get we never really forget our past and always end up returning to that place from where we started from. I especially like*

Naoko's piece as we should never forget to smile and never give up by staying determined even when we're in the worst possible situations.

A student reflection from Osaka Gakuin, in the Art and Memory project, responded in this way to the essential question "What does artistic expression, spanning time and place, reveal about humanity, conflict, and our future?"

I think reading the poem, I think good study. In fact, I forgot about the war. But I learned scariness of war and importance of life. The war killed everything. Children and families; animals and houses, and hospital and important memories. I think [I] cannot agree the war.

I feel that everyone did very good. But I think difficult to say in English. I think war is not good. I hope peace all over the world. I hate war!

And finally, the responses of the Osaka Gakuin students to the collaborative song, composed by Koji Nakajima and the student participants seem to touch upon the enduring knowledge that is the ultimate goal of our learning community: "The song is effective in our understanding that we rise above different languages. The song is rhythmical and easy to understand. We can receive people in the world though the words are different."

Conclusions

Our results, based upon student responses to the project's essential questions and the completion and participation rate for project tasks and activities, seem to attest to the success of the project in nurturing authentic and engaging experiences for students in the K20 population. More study is needed to assess the rigor of their responses, going beyond the assessments of the teacher researchers involved in the project.

The integration of online communication tools evolved in complexity as each subsequent project was designed and implemented by the team, culminating in the multi-site collaborative teams that utilized videoconferencing, email, and online forums for team sharing and decision-making. The teacher research team, however, is again revising the collaborative process, to be tested in the most recent project, which will commence in April 2006.

And finally, the continued participation of team members, through two years and four projects, attests to the success of our collaborative efforts. This element, too, will need more statistical support and we are in the process of analyzing the project email files for the types of professional communication they represent.

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