If You Build It

Will They Come?

Conversations about Technology and Community

If You Build It

Will They Come?

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Introduction

Education and Technology

Technology is everywhere. From the automated bank teller and the grocery store checkout counter to the World Wide Web and email, our daily lives are changing because of the presence of technology. The pace of change sometimes seems mind-boggling. To some, technology is exciting, and engenders a new hopefulness. It makes others feel confused and fearful. No one wants to be left behind, even if we don't entirely understand how it will ultimately affect our lives.

No where is the meaning and importance of technology more a topic of discussion than education. The question is not simply whether schools should be teaching students how to use computers, but can technology be used as a tool to teach differently, or in some cases, better. Technology holds the promise of not just making students computer literate, but of truly preparing them for an information age in which synthesis of information from multiple sources and workplace collaboration and decision-making are essential skills for success.

And what about the teachers? How will they be integrated into this whirlwind of change that is taking place? How do teachers learn more about technology? How do they become comfortable with teaching students who seem increasingly to know more about how to download software and surf the Web than their teachers? How do they find out how to use technology effectively in their classrooms. Like students, teachers need to learn in a supportive environment. One of the ongoing questions about the uses of technology is whether technology itself can provide that supportive environment.

Since 1995, the U.S. Department of Education's Technology Innovation Challenge Grant program has tried to be a catalyst for positive change in the integration of technology into schools. Through 5-year grants, the Challenge Grant program has encouraged state and local educational consortiums to develop innovative ideas about how to use technology to improve education. It's not simply about putting a computer in a classroom and waiting to see what happens. Projects in the Northeast Challenge Grant group alone vary from collecting immigrant life stories on the World Wide Web to showing kids how to be better artists, and from developing

> **"One important role for technologies is as the backbone for an invigorated, vibrant professional community among educators. This will not happen, however, without considerable effort to design the technologies and the social structure of their use with this objective made explicit."**
> **Jan Hawkins, 1996**

software programs for understanding sustainability to creating online forums for educators to share curriculum ideas and evaluative methods. All the Challenge Grant projects share a fundamental commitment to finding ways of using technology to improve education, but they also believe that creating partnerships between local school districts, universities, businesses, libraries, software designers and others can improve education. The result has been a greater involvement of interested stake-holders in educational issues.

Challenge Grant programs nationwide have resulted in practical returns in terms of educational standards, but they have also created a new excitement about education in both students and teachers. Success takes many forms. In a Challenge Grant project one would expect to see technical skill levels improve. But we are just beginning to understand how technology has facilitated a less tangible outcome, one that addresses a more personal experience that feels to some like a sense of "community."

Community and Technology

When the Challenge Grant projects began meeting, discussions extended beyond comparing concrete results. It became clear that many projects were creating, unintentionally in many cases, something variously described as collaboration or cooperation, caring, mutual respect, a sense of belong among it's participants. Something was happening in the projects that was bringing people together. Participants were talking to each other in a different way. There was a sense of trust. Parents, students, and educators said they felt more powerful, even transformed, by their involvement.

Tentatively, this experience began to be called "community." But what is a community, especially in the context of email, web pages, and computer screens? Is a community just your friends and neighbors? Is it the colleagues you meet with at lunch? Is it simply a group of like-minded people? Your town? A work group? Is it a lifestyle devoted to common values and belief systems? Is it the online discussion group you post to every night?

In the context of technology and education, are the Challenge Grant projects building community? If so, who's part of it? Is building community an appropriate goal? Can a project consciously build community, or is it something that naturally emerges? Are there any methods of community-building that can be passed on to those just getting started in a project? To quote from one of the conversations in this booklet, "It's kind of like, 'If you build it, will they come?'"

"Community" is a word people take seriously. And it is safe to say that there is no single definition. Nor is there complete agreement on its merits as a project goal or outcome. But clearly many projects have acknowledged that, by whatever definition they choose, there is some kind of shared community-building going on it their projects, some by design and others by chance. This booklet is an attempt begin a discussion about this phenomena common to many.

Instead of trying to define "community," this booklets lets four project leaders, all of whom agree that their projects have created community, speak for themselves. They are not the only Challenge Grant members who feel that community has emerged from their projects. Nor are their views the only perspectives with the Challenge Grant projects. It is likely that even within their own projects there are differences of opinion. But the necessary length of this booklet has limited our ability to document a complete discussion of the issues involved.

This publication is far from a definitive statement about community and technology. In fact, it is only the first vague outline of an emerging topic. The issue of community-building in these educational projects is one that is ongoing and evolving, not the least because, in some cases, it was a completely unexpected outcome. This booklet is an attempt to provide some initial thoughts and observations as well as some advice that arises from experience. We hope the discussion will continue.

Learning Together

"If we're not teaching people to be part of a community, then we're depriving them of a basic human necessity. "

THE PROJECT

The Virtual High School (VHS) is a collaboration of high schools which exchange a small amount of teaching time for a catalog of NetCourses which they can offer to their students. Each school contributes at least one teacher who develops and offers a NetCourse to VHS students. In exchange, each school can enroll up to 20 students per semester in VHS courses. NetCourses range from advanced academic courses to technical and specialized courses. As VHS gains popularity, schools can contribute more teachers, enroll more students and help make a wider variety of courses available to the student body.

Schools provide computers, Internet connectivity, and staff time, including a VHS site coordinator who is responsible for project management and support of the local teacher and students at the school. Quality of content and delivery is maintained by requiring each teacher to successfully complete the Teachers Learning Conference, a graduate-level NetCourse that exposes participants to the best strategies and technology for NetCourse teaching.

In 1996, when the Virtual High School started, Marsha West was on the verge of retiring from the English department. Starting something new professionally was the last thing on her mind.

FIRST PERSON

Marsha West, VHS Teacher and Site Coordinator

How did you first get involved in this project?

Our superintendent came to one of our morning faculty meetings to tell us about some "wonderfully exciting" things that we were doing in our school district. He finished up by saying, "One of them is this"VHS project, which I think Marsha's going to be doing for us." And everyone turned and looked at me in astonishment. I'd never heard of VHS. Afterwards I went up to him and told him that I didn't intend to do something different from what I was doing. I was really close to retirement at that point, and I didn't want to get involved with a new project. I told him that I was tired of taking workshops and that I just wanted to be left alone.

He had thought of me because everybody knew that I was hanging out on the Internet all the time. Well, I took the papers home and I read through all the VHS job descriptions, and I thought, "This thing is going to be a real disaster if it's not done right." I really didn't want to see my career ending on a note like that. So I thought to myself, "What would it take to make this thing work?"

The best students in high school don't go on their own into the effort of learning — they require a lot of motivation. So, I thought, "The only way it's going to work is if they do their work under the supervision of a certified teacher, and if I'm going to be the teacher I might just as well be the local site coordinator too." And so I decided the only way we could do this was if they let me do it my way, which was to let me be supervisor of the kids on task, and the site coordinator, and the teacher. Most VHS site coordinators just meet with the kids once a week or so. I added a third role which I think has been a real key to our success.

So I wrote a proposal, and I got really excited about it because I'd never written a job proposal in my life. I made copies for a meeting and I walked my principal through it from beginning to end. And then I sort of shut my eyes and waited for the lightning to strike me — because I thought it would. When my principal said, "It sounds great to me," I just went up like a helium balloon. I was so excited because that would let me teach, and play on the Internet, and work in my own subject area and no other area, and be in my room which I really liked all day. Then I realized I had to create a class; I suddenly realized I didn't have a clue how to do it!

What role do you play in the project?

I am a 'net-teacher. I teach a class called WebQuest: A Literary Odyssey. It's essentially an AP English course on the Web. I'm also the VHS site coordinator for my school, and I manage the computer lab all day for the VHS students. I have 40 VHS students in my classroom spread throughout the day, and they are my first responsibility. I also work with our district technical staff, our school's administrators, and other VHS teachers. It's been very much a team effort from the beginning. This past year, I was a facilitator for the VHS site coordinator training, and I got very much involved with other site coordinators. I work with everybody, so I definitely see the project from inside and outside, sideways, and up and down.

What is the primary goal of this project and some of its benefits?

Our superintendent wanted more curriculum offerings for our stu-

dents, more integration of technology into our programs, and high visibility school reform and public relations. The main appeal for me was teaching my subject matter and using computers to do it, teaching kids who wanted to be there, and being able to do it the way I thought it would work. Most of my working life, other people have set the conditions for me. This was a chance for me to say how I thought a job should be done.

The main benefit of this project for our kids is that it gives them the opportunity to take classes they don't get to take every day, and to do it through the fascinating medium of the Internet. For a while, most of our students saw VHS as something only computer nerds did. But then they kind of got pulled in by the subject matter. Where else do they offer a class about sailing?

Some of the benefits I didn't anticipate are skills students gain that will translate well to the workplace. I'm really convinced that much of the work of the future will be done collaboratively over a distance. I think our kids' experience in VHS has given them such a leg up on that. I always tell them they should keep their VHS certificates after high school - those certificates say that you have something special that most other people don't have. You know how to work in a group and get a job done, with people that you don't necessarily even know.

I think working with teachers and students who are all excited about being part of something new has been great for the kids as well as the faculty. Kids work with a lot of bored teachers, teachers who are tired, burned out, discouraged and down to bottom line survival. This group of teachers tends to approach what they're doing with so much more enthusiasm and I think that's got to have an effect on the kids.

Another benefit is the relationships that develop within the classes, and the opportunity for students to become part of a community. Students in my school tend to speak of a good class as being one in which they've bonded with their classmates. In the netcourse I teach, the kids really feel that they have formed an enduring and important set of relationships, and that their conversations have become meaningful. Oftentimes when we have more than one local

kid in a particular class, they form a nucleus among themselves locally, in relation to their netcourse. Hopefully they also bond with some others in the class. In some cases they even bond with the class as a whole.

How can a netcourse teacher facilitate collaboration and community?

As in a face to face class, it's easier to lecture and to answer questions than it is to facilitate lively discussions where the kids talk to each other instead of talking to you in front of others. The courses that are kind of sad have a teacher at the center, and materials "out there," with kids just sort of standing around in isolation from both their classmates and the teacher, doing their work and sending it in. It's not a real problem in VHS, but I have seen a couple of classes like that. What works best for VHS and what gives kids the most value is when they are taught how to relate to one another and how to work collaboratively. The greatest benefit of this project is that we have the capacity to do that. However, it requires a lot of energy on the part of the teacher, and it's not an easy thing. You have to teach the students skills, such as how to modulate their "voice" to enable effective communication. Sometimes you have to quench flames and spark dull discourse at the same time, and keep the discussion at a place where it's energizing without being inflammatory, and that's not easy. When it clicks it's just amazing. It hasn't worked with every single kid, but it has worked in every class for me in two years with the project. It's just like in a real classroom. For me, the technology is a way to do what you try to do in any situation: find the best use of something and the best way to use it.

How does technology help with community building?

Very simply, in a VHS class no one interrupts you when you speak. One of the consistent problems in face-to-face classes is that some people interrupt other people, the verbal people run over the quiet people. So you constantly have situations where one person starts to speak and a noisier, more extroverted person jumps in, leaving the other person's point forgotten as the discussion runs to a different topic. In a virtual environment, no one can interrupt you. You have

a chance to formulate your whole statement -- no matter how profound or shallow -- and nobody runs over the last half of it or forgets that you ever said it. I think that's very important.

The other thing is that you don't usually flash back an answer quite as spontaneously or as thoughtlessly as you might otherwise. You have time to reflect on your answer, because just the act of hitting a comment button and opening a form means you have time to think before you post. I find that the level of discourse tends to be more civilized and more thoughtful, which leads to more depth in discussion. I think the time lag is an instrument of value I would never want to lose in a virtual real time environment. I think that chat by definition is always shallow because nobody thinks significantly well or fast enough. I do a lot of AOL instant messaging to take care of business and to get ideas, but you can't do in real time chat what you can do in an asynchronous online environment.

One of your students commented that the value of the asynchronous environment is that you don't lose a thread of discussion; you can always return to it if you want to explore it further.

You are right. Some of the things that have happened in these conversations are really important and wonderful. As a teacher and as a professional, I love the asynchronous environment because it really allows me to examine the discourse. You can measure exactly where a specific discussion is - whether students are throwing song lyrics back and forth (often in significant ways), or whether they are probing real sensitive areas. I have a discussion about heroes in my class, and one student said her hero was the state president in her Mormon church. A second student asked her if it was because she wanted to be a president too, and the first girl replied that, no, it was just because he is a person of integrity and kindness, and besides girls can't be state presidents. She said, "I know you probably think that's sexist, but it's really not." And the discussion that ensued was tremendously respectful. In a real class room, you are more likely to get raised voices and cat calls, or kids who are too embarrassed to talk about issues like this, but I've found in VHS that

students are not embarrassed to talk about very much. I see a respect for knowledge instead of the competition or scorn you often see in school for someone who's trying to sound smart. There is never that. I think it's both because of the situation and because I'm teaching and modeling the right ways to carry on a conversation with both freedom and a certain adult attitude, discouraging harshness or abrasiveness.

What does community mean to you?

A "community" is a complex set of relationships among three or more persons, where a dynamic is going on, where there is an interchange of ideas, where one's personality comes to bear, where you come to be known and get to know other people in an intuitive way, and where you have investment in that group as an entity in itself. I think there has to be some value to you. You can have a set of complex relationships with a bunch of people who hate each other, but I don't think that's a community. In a real community you will have some conflict -- it doesn't always have to be love and kisses. And there are different roles that people will take. A working group can be a community, but without personal investment, it's merely a committee. There can be collaborative work without community, but it will be sterile. Only those groups in which you become engaged feel like communities to me. Any situation where you are personally invested in the successful dynamics of the group -- it doesn't always have to be product oriented -- is a community. There has to be something about the dynamics of the human relationships that gives you some benefit and satisfaction.

What makes VHS feel like a community to you?

There are several communities in VHS. There is a community within my class, and a community among the VHS teachers. There is community that develops in each TLC [Teacher Learning Conference, the VHS Professional Development course] among participants and their mentors and facilitators. My TLC mentor and I developed a very strong friendship three years ago, which has endured. We still correspond, and when we see each other we really feel like we know each other, and we still feel like friends. The first TLC II and

Learning Space Update courses also created community. Those of us who took those continuing education courses were real tight, and we learned to be really mad at the rest who were never there. So you know you have a have a community if you are mad and know who you are mad at!

We in the VHS community like each other; we know what to expect from each other. We know for example that it's Louine's "job" to send out electronic greeting cards for every holiday. She forgot to do it for a while, and we had to talk to her about it. We know that Matt posts baby pictures in the Faculty Lounge Water Cooler discussion area, and I put up dog pictures. And I do animation and embedments all the time. Partially I'm doing that because I want to teach my colleagues how to do things -- like attach a .gif image -- and make it fun. We try to provoke each to learn new stuff. I go into the faculty Water Cooler and Summer Study Hall every time I go online and check out what's going on, just like I would go into the faculty room in my own school and schmooze with my friends. I tell other site coordinators and teachers that if you don't do that, then you are not part of the project. We are all supposed to be modeling and doing what we want our kids to do. So those teachers who don't facilitate good discussions in their VHS classes are the same ones who don't come to the Water Cooler discussion area. It's real clear; there is a real correlation. Faculty members who get involved and become part of the VHS community are then able to create community in their own courses.

The community among the VHS faculty is very strong, we have shared goals and experiences. I recently got a letter from a fellow VHS teacher with her concerns about next year's schedule, and that made me realize that we are in touch all the time. We talk about kids in our classes, VHS issues, course design. Email among teachers is a really important part of it.

Do you experience this kind of thing with teachers locally, outside the VHS project?

Not on pedagogical issues. The kind of email communication I have with friends and colleagues at my school is more like sharing interesting web sites we've found or the school announcement of the

day; it's a very utilitarian kind of thing. It's a fairly low level of discourse. What happens in the conversations with other VHS teachers and myself is much more an academic and theoretical kind of level, a much higher level of discourse, I would say. We talk about educational theory, and how to deal with different issues in education. The face-to-face teacher's meeting in Concord, Massachusetts, was the most wonderful teachers meeting I've ever been to. I was so sick of our local teacher meetings, where everyone whines about the same old things. The VHS meetings weren't like that. It was exciting and stimulating, and I came away feeling energized. So there's definitely a different kind of level of community among VHS teachers as a group.

Is community something that was planned as part of the VHS project or did it just happen?

As a teacher I plan it in my netcourse. I didn't think it would happen in the TLC when I was a student. It happened slowly and there wasn't any expectation on my part. In fact, I would have resented being told that we were expected to become a community. In the original questionnaire I filled out for VHS, there was a lot of stuff about how I felt about team teaching or being part of a collaborative work group, and the very thought of that made me almost ready to say no. I thought they were going to coerce me in that direction, and I was very adamant about not wanting to teach with anyone else. I've been through enough collaborative workshops to have been coerced many times, and so I didn't want anyone to come in and tell me that I had to become part of a community.

The thing that did build community in TLC was not the planned get-to-know you activities, but rather the Water Cooler discussion area which was an open forum where we could talk about anything. When we started posting our baby pictures and dog pictures and hobbies, and where to find the best coffee in San Francisco -- that did it. It began to happen spontaneously. Up until a certain point the discussion was kind of this mushy "this is who I am, this is what I'm doing, blah blah blah." What really sparked the Water Cooler discussion was when Cheryl posted a picture of herself on the phone. After that, I drew a faculty lounge kitchen and posted the graphic, and then Louine found a coke machine image to put in that kitchen. We were helping each other learn in a friendly way. That's why I created a "campus coffee shop" discussion area in my VHS course. I wanted to create a place for my students to go and play, that was more than just a text-based discussion. I think that's a way for them to start building community at the beginning of the course. I created an eye-catching image to be the logo for the coffee house, and a list of subject titles for them to comment under. I used a "join discussion" button in the course to send them straight there, and I told them to look through and read what other people posted. And I think it worked even though it was much more deliberate than what happened to us in the TLC. But, we were adults, and my guess is that those who were facilitating at that time wondered what we would come up with, and they gave us a place to do it in. I'm not sure I would let kids do it all on their own. I would sense that if you want a community to develop, you have to create some kind of forum like the Water Cooler. It's not going to happen just through the assignments.

I think the reason we've developed a strong community among the VHS faculty is the educational component of the project. I think it makes all the difference in the world that we share a strong commitment to excellence and school reform, and that people in the project are continuously trying to grow. There is a dynamism in the way we do it. In VHS, the teachers learn with the kids, using the same model. I run my own VHS course as a seminar in which all the participants act as both student and teacher, myself included.

Has this project brought in people from the community who wouldn't otherwise be involved in education?

As a site coordinator, I am concerned about PR in the community. In our first year, my VHS kids held a reception for their parents. They sent out invitations, brought in food, and sat down with their parents at the computers. It was great PR, and our local newspaper editor became interested in VHS. He ran a two page spread and a five week series on VHS. He's become extremely committed to pursuing the project.

Has this project enabled communication between individuals who otherwise would not be able to communicate?

Yes. You are not going to get this many people with this level of expertise and this level of commitment together in one place physically. The VHS participants are spread around the country.

One of the things my VHS students are saying is that they didn't expect ever to be in a class where people would talk about the things they talk about in my course. They say they feel like they are in college already. That they hadn't been able to share ideas with other people who cared about their ideas before. They never felt there was a place for them to do this. VHS is really about kids finding other kids around the country who share interests and a similar level of understanding and thinking.

I used to have to scratch to find enough kids to make up an AP English class, and now I don't have to do that. I have the benefit of access to students who have good minds and who want to be in my class, and they have the benefit of access to me.

Being part of this community has also given me responsibilities I didn't have before, like traveling and giving presentations. It's certainly increased my opportunities for networking amazingly. In fact, it's kind of overwhelming at my age to have whole new career opportunities opening up when I'm too old to take advantage of them.

Are there any specific strategies that you use to build community in your online course?

I try to build trust within my course, and teach kids ways to treat each other to bring out the best in each other. I model the correct kinds of voices and behaviors for an academic environment, and I correct, encourage, and counsel students to be able to relate to other people and to take responsibility for each other. Those are things I also hope to take to the TLC (the VHS online professional development course) in my role as instructor. With teachers as well as with kids, I teach by modeling and showing examples of what works. That's why I like to take people in and show them around

my course. If you visit my course, you can see my group, for example, trying to draw out a classmate and make him a part of their community even if he isn't producing valuable work. And you can see me prodding that same student in the private discussion area I set up for him, and trying to provoke him in a number of different ways. I think every teacher should have a private discussion area for every student, because you sometimes need to say things to your students in a private way. I also think all VHS teachers must have an interactive discussion area; this should not be an option. The primary conversations should take place in the asynchronous course room and not in email. I'm an absolute enemy of email as part of the student experience of VHS. It invites them to waste their time, and it leaves no record of what's been said. I wrote an article about this, titled "Not email, not chat."

Are there things you have to do differently in your online course than in your local classroom?

Rather than differently, I'd say you have to find different strategies for doing the same thing. You have to find a way to do in a written text field what you can do with the raise of an eyebrow or a gesture in a classroom. I think the hardest thing about learning to teach well in a virtual environment is learning how to translate the body language and the intuitive things you do in teaching to written text in an asynchronous environment. Those are things you find you do so unconsciously in face-to-face teaching, without even knowing you're doing them. I use many graphics in my course design to get around using straight text. You can sometimes do the raise of the eyebrow or the encouraging grin with a picture. You can lighten up the material that way, or get very serious if you need to.

Were there any attempts to build community in this project that didn't work?

I would say the first weeks of the original TLC were a waste of time in that sense. I kept waiting for the instructors to do something that would work. I remember they sent us to look at some educational standards early on. I think that was an important thing to do, but then we were supposed to come back and talk about them. But

what is there to say about standards? "All third graders should know how to do long division to the third place." It doesn't give you much to talk about. I think it's fine to start out with pedagogy, it's just not realistic to expect that that will create community. That may create a shared understanding of what you're doing; it's very task oriented, and I think that's fine. But I don't think you should ask people to get "touchy-feely" with it. I had a sense that there was a conflict between giving us heavy, boring information, and the wish that we should all be "touchy-feely" with that information. However, I think that was a very temporary problem. When we started playing around, both in the regular discussion areas and in the "Watercooler," then I started to see that a community was developing. It was the playing around that made it happen for me, as well as our technical support person's cheerful, practical, ready answers, and the willingness of the instructors to answer phones and to talk to us voice-to-voice when we were really desperate.

Do you think community is something your project should be promoting?

Yes. I think that the only bad aspect of distance education is if it becomes independent study. That's terribly isolating, and it's not good for people. I don't want to have anything to do with any educational experience on the Internet that is not collaborative and interactive. Education is about socialization, acculturalization. If we're not teaching people to be part of a community, then we're depriving them of a basic human necessity. We must be part of a community to be civilized human beings.

RESOURCES

TOOLS

VHS Home Page
http://vhs.concord.org

Forks High School Home Page
http://www.forks.wednet.edu/high/index.htm

VHS Demo Course
A demo based on Marsha West's AP English course.
http://vhs.concord.org/Pages/Academics-Explore+a+Class

VHS Interactive Map
An interactive map of all the VHS schools by state.
http://vhs.concord.org/Pages/About+Us-Where+is+VHS

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TIPS

✔ If your project has an online educational component, design that experience so that it will be collaborative and interactive. Otherwise, it will become isolating.

✔ If your project involves online communication, use asynchronous threaded discussions for more in-depth and inclusive conversations than you can achieve through instant "chat" or email.

✔ Whether it be online or offline, provide some sort of forum within your project where participants can get to know each other on a more personal and casual level. Provide a place where they can talk, play, and relax.

✔ In order for collaboration to happen, there must be a teacher (or moderator) who is skilled at guiding the participants towards effective communications.

✔ Find strategies for getting students to interact with each other, instead of just interacting with the teacher. It may be easier to lecture and to answer questions than to facilitate lively discussions where the kids talk to each other, but this type of interaction is essential in any course if you really want to build a community of co-learners.

✔ The project should try to unite people with shared goals and experiences, so that they will feel engaged and personally invested in the successful dynamics of the group.

✔ In a technology-oriented project, it's important to encourage participants to play and not be afraid of making mistakes with the technology. It is also essential that the project provide strong technical support.

✔ Create an environment where everyone - even the "experts" - learn new things. This allows the participants to feel they are all learning something new together, and that they all have something to give and take from the group experience.

A Sense of Place

American Gateways: Immigration and Migration
in the United States

"It's sort of like 'If you build it will they come?'"

THE PROJECT

There are many sources that contribute to a child's education. The American Gateways Project draws together ethnically diverse populations of students, parents, and community members and prepares them for the challenges of the 21st century by creating a human web of community support systems and a technology web of resources and experts.

For more than 100 years New York City settlement houses have been the gateway for immigrants and migrants making the transition into a new society. Sandy Goldberg, Project Director for the Gateways Community Voice initiative, is helping a coalition of settlement house staff, community members, parents, students and teachers work together to develop Web-based content relevant to the study of immigration and migration. Together, they are building an online community where settlement house participants are primary sources of information for students researching and discovering the history of their neighborhoods. As they work to develop their web site, the coalition is building and strengthening the capacity of the settlement houses to effectively integrate technology into their programs.

Sandy Goldberg, Project Director, Settlement House Initiative

How did the Settlement House project get started?

Because we're talking about New York City, when it comes to emigration, settlement houses were very instrumental and involved in the early days and today working with immigrants. Seven settlement houses located in the Lower East Side and Harlem neighborhoods of New York are consortium partners in the American Gateways challenge grant. We wanted to use community members as primary sources of information for kids who are studying immigration and migration and the history of their communities. Plus we wanted to

In the last century, settlement houses were a place of transition for immigrant populations in New York City. In the 21st century, the Gateways project uses technology instead of tea parties to support communication, education, and professional development in the community.

extend the project not just to the school but into the community. Settlement houses also provide after school programs for kids and classes for adults.

When we started a couple of things became obvious. One is that oral history was the way to go. And two, we wanted to use the technology to build school-community connections and collaborations as a way to extend the meaning of community. But when I started doing searches on the Internet on school-community collaborations, the only thing I found was the business community. That was what was considered the schools' connection with the community. I didn't find very much where people talked about connecting schools with the people in the community. This really is our focus.

One of the things we explain to settlement house people is that this project is to help improve the schools and help the schools use technology in meaningful ways. We explain that the schools are studying immigration and migration and using technology to help them study that. With their experience, they are the subject matter experts. We ask them to share the information they have with the children in the schools. Their experiences. I think people were really interested to get on and start writing.

I think they feel a lot of pride. I like to think that helps inform what they say. It opens them up a little more to talk. A lot of them, if you read some of them, you can see that they're just learning English and it becomes an exercise in English to just sit down and talk about their experiences. There are some people who don't say very much. And some of them are so rich and so amazing. If you read some of the seniors from the Lower East Side they're talking about the kind of lifestyle that they had—putting a quarter in the meter to get gas for the lights, their mother going down in the basement to get coal for cooking and for heating, and scrubbing floors.

What's the role of technology?

So far people are posting their own life stories on the web site. What we're hoping will start to happen is people will be able to get on and read other people's stories and search based on country of

origin or neighborhood or language spoken and age of the immigrants. Then they can read other people's life stories and hopefully connect with them on a bulletin board that we've put up.

We do have an interesting population now. There is a senior population at one of the houses that is mostly Jewish and most of them were the first in their families to be born here. Their parents had come through Ellis Island. They're in their eighties for the most part and came from Russia, Poland, Latvia, Eastern European countries. Another group of seniors from one of the settlements felt more comfortable posting in Spanish. We intend to have a button you can press to translate into English. We have a lot of people from the Balkans in some of the settlements. Not many of them have posted yet, but I know that the adult literacy population from one of the houses has a lot of people from there.

At this point we're looking to extend out to the schools. So in summer, for example, there was an institute of the teachers in District One. One of the teachers did a lot of work during the school year on the Maya. There are a lot of Mexican immigrants in the communities that we work with. So she posted a query for anyone who was born in Mexico asking if they studied the Maya culture in school, how it was approached, and what they know about it. That's the kind of collaboration that we're looking for at this point. Later it could be that different settlement houses would discuss issues around immigration, around welfare-to-work, different issues that affect everybody.

One of the things we're working on now is a teacher's guide to using primary source materials in the classroom. We did a whole summer institute where they were learning how to make use of that. The life stories we have on our web site are just one of the primary sources available to teachers. Eventually it will be searchable. They can post their own family stories, they can read about other people, and depending on what they're doing, they can search.

We haven't advertised in a big way. We're just working with a few houses because we're still working things out backendwise on the site and we can't handle a huge flow. We've just focused on the

seven settlements houses that are part of American Gateways. There are a whole bunch of others, some of them in Queens and places like that where they have a lot of immigrants and a varied immigrant population. I know that in East Harlem there are many more Mexicans than on the Lower East Side. There is also an African population, a West African population that has not posted yet. But I know they're involved in that settlement house.

As far as reaching out to populations who haven't been involved is, another side of what we're doing is the community technology center movement. We're trying to provide access to technology and training in technology to people who don't have computers at home and don't otherwise have access.

What makes it feel like a community?

I think that the participants consider their involvement in the settlement houses as being part of a community . People are sharing similar experiences. And I know that community-building is a very big running theme among settlements. The settlement houses have done a lot of studies on the community –building aspect. I found that really interesting. Little snippets related to what I'm doing.

As a whole what we're trying to do is to form almost meta-communities—a community of communities. Each of the different settlement houses in and of themselves have little communities within them. The adult ESOL population, the senior groups, after school use groups—they're all like little communities. But in terms of going across settlements that's where I'm hoping that technology will begin to build a greater community across the city.

One of the other things that settlement houses are trying to do, similar to schools, is to integrate the technology into the programs. It's very easy to use it administratively, and it's easy for the after school kids to sit and play games, but how do you really tie it in to your program goals and make it work for you. I think Gateways is one way they find they can do it easily with adults and with seniors.

When I came on I don't think I was looking to build community

right away. I think it evolved. I think that getting to know the settlements and their history, and seeing what that community was trying to do without technology, I began to see how technology can get involved. I'd like to believe that the technology is opening people up, that people are talking about experiences that they might not otherwise talk about. If somebody approached each of these people with a tape recorder and a microphone and interviewed them, some might talk but other people might not be willing to be interviewed. They might be more willing to write about it on a compute r. I'm kind of guessing, but I think it's a lot easier to collect a lot of stories this way. I also think that it becomes more of a learning experience for the community members, because at the same time that they're talking about their own personal histories, they're also learning to use a computer and working on their English communication skills.

I'd like to build a community of learners among the teachers too. We wanted to build a bulletin board for teachers because this group of teachers was together for four weeks this summer. These people knew very little about making a web page or any of that stuff but they went to the federal archives in New York and got old maps and census reports, all kinds of interesting stuff and they really got into it and started building and creating web projects that they wanted to continue throughout the year. So I would like to put up a bulletin board for them to start sharing as they go back into their classrooms and start applying what they learned during the summer. It was fascinating to see over the course of four weeks how they had bonded. A little community. And I hope it keeps on as the school years goes on.

What are some of the technology challenges you faced?

What comes to my mind is really software tools. One of the things that we looked high and low for is a BBS that isn't intensely threaded. When they have all these different threads and different levels, it can be very confusing, even for experienced users. We found one that is a topic and then lists everything on one level under the topic. We'll see. Right now we have very little up there, but as it grows hopefully it will prove to be a useful tool. We're trying as much as

possible to develop different things. So whatever resources we've used and developed we make available. I don't know how quickly that's all going to get up there but it's one of our goals.

I don't work directly for the school district, so as we had things together, when there was a meeting of the staff developers in the district, I had a couple of demonstrations for them. One of the issues has been that the teachers don't all have Internet access in the classroom. They have the T1 lines into the building, but the LANs aren't set up so they don't have access. I believe that soon they will all have access.

Everybody that we've come across has been very positive and interested in using technology. There have been some people who have just used their first names and there was one group that didn't want their pictures on the Internet. We're now trying to capture some voice interviews and a lot of the sound files are in Spanish. They're in the process of being redone.

We had group of teachers at a summer institute that we're developing into lead teachers. They read a story from a very young person who had immigrated from a country in Latin America within the last six months. Another was from a Puerto Rican and another one was an 85-year-old who had been on the Lower East Side her whole life. They were all very rich stories and the teachers were so fascinated by them. They worked a lot with their own life stories, too, which are amazing. They got very involved in the site first hand and they hopefully will go back into their classrooms and have their students start using it. We put them through exercises they might want to do with their kids where we have them read a story and then talk about "What do you know about this person now? What do you want to know?" There are at least a handful of classes that are pairing up with some of the senior programs to do some face-to-face interviews.

One of our big efforts is to meet with the staff of the settlement houses and introduce them to the site and get them involved using it. We had two sessions for settlement house staff so they could learn how to make web pages. What we did was set up a bulletin

board, and what we hoped would happen was that in between workshops and sessions, and afterwards, they would continue to share their ideas and community through this bulletin board. And nobody did. Part of it is these are all people who have five other jobs. So to even think about doing some web stuff was already above and beyond what they were already doing. We had asked people between each session to look over some things and post their responses on the bulletin board. But what we found people doing was coming to class a little bit early and sitting down and posting. So that didn't really work. It's sort of like "If you build it will they come?"

One thing that we're finding, and that's why we're hoping the bulletin board will start to take off, is that once people finish their life stories there isn't much reason for them to come back onto the site. But if we develop this community bulletin board where people can go in, say what they think, join in discussion, get involved, then there might be more reason for them to continue.

RESESOURCES

TOOLS

**American Gateways: Immigration and Migration
in the United States**
http://www.nycenet.edu/csd1/gateways.htm

The Gateways Community Voice
http://gateways.unhny.org

TIPS

✔ Give participants a reason to come back to your web site -
something to look forward to. Can they talk with people
they've come to know? Maybe they're looking for some feed-
back on an idea.

✔ An online community bulletin board is a good way for people
to get involved. American Gateways integrates participation in
bulletin boards in with adult education classes for computer
and Internet skills.

✔ Make sure the bulletin board is not too heavily threaded.

✔ The web site should have many resources available.

✔ Make the front end of any online interface as seamless as possi-
ble. That applies to the application as well as the layout and
design. Less is more.

✔ Translate information into languages other than English.

✔ Make sure everyone has access to the network.

Mutuality

*The WEB Project:
Creating a WEB of Evidence of Student Performance in
Nonverbal Inquiry and Expression*

"This idea of community is one of the most powerful things to come out of our work. It wasn't in our goals, we didn't say let's go out and create a community, but yet that's the thing people keep coming back to."
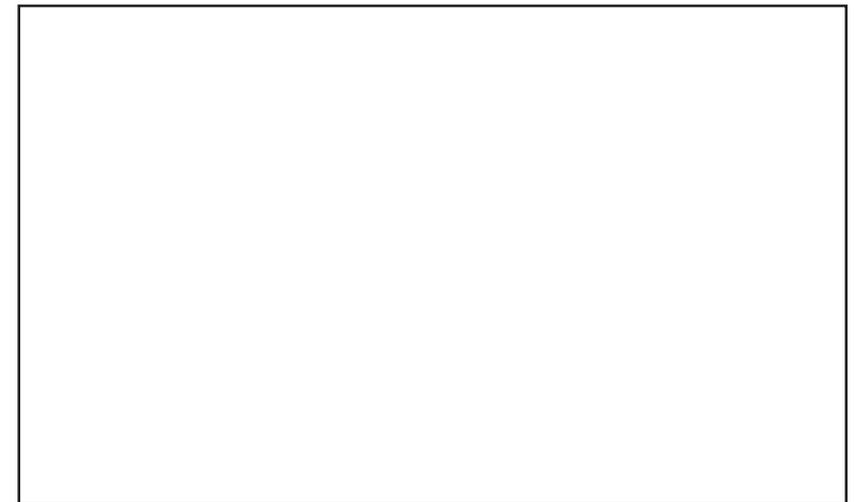
THE PROJECT

FIRST PERSON

Fern Tavalin, Project Director

to be added

To be added

Making Connections

Challenge 2000 Multimedia Project

"We are very purposefully trying to offer a place for people to join a community and develop community."

THE PROJECT

The Challenge 2000 Multimedia Project is an effort based on prior research on technology innovations within schools. That research suggests that computer and telecommunications technology can support several goals: student-centered classrooms, greater student engagement and responsibility for learning, and increased collaboration with peers and others. The Multimedia Project puts these ideas to the test by helping teachers design and implement student-centered classroom projects whereby students can demonstrate their ideas and knowledge using multimedia presentations. Important to the project is student acquisition of high-tech workplace skills — not just computer knowledge, but problem-solving acumen, communication skills, and the ability to work in teams and assess their own work. Michael Simkins is the Project Director for the Challenge 2000 Multimedia Project, which is based in the Silicon Valley, California.

Michael Simkins, Project Director

How did you get involved in this Challenge Grant project?

I was working as an elementary school principal and I got a phone call from the director of the Challenge 2000 project asking me if I was interested in being project manager for a federal technology grant they had received. One thing led to another. I was already interested in technology and its potential for education and I was also, I want to say, "fond" of project-based learning. This project puts both those things together. It was a natural for me. I had always worked within schools and school reform efforts and I was intrigued by working with school reform in a different context.

Silicon Valley is a large sprawling, densely populated place. The Multimedia Project has managed to bring together and connect teachers from all over that region, from many different schools dis-

tricts. What they have in common is a shared interest in using multi-media technology as a tool in teaching. In particular they're also intrigued by this project-based kind of approach. Instead of kids interacting with CD-ROMs and DVDs and other multimedia teaching materials that are professionally published, the whole idea is kids constructing their own multimedia productions.

What is the community aspect of the Multimedia Project?

I don't know that I used that term. I'm trying to implement a model. An overall goal of this was spreading this model of project-based learning through multimedia in Silicon Valley. So in terms of what were the strategies of doing that—developing a community of practice, or a community of teachers—it wasn't stated that way. What is community? What are we using to define it? No longer does it have the geographic bounds. It's a set of shared interests. I think there's a sense of people caring about one another and a feeling of responsibility towards one another.

I think communities also have their nicknames for things, their abbreviations. For example where I live we talk about SLO ["slow"] and we all know that it stands for San Luis Obispo. The rest of the world doesn't know what we're talking about when we refer to SLO this and SLO that. The Multimedia Project certainly has started to develop a language and a set of terms that the insiders know. This role of what we call "TLC" is an example. Most people think "Tender Loving Care," and there's an aspect of that, but it actually stands for "Technology Learning Coordinator," and even that doesn't describe it very well. But the people in the project, all the teachers, know exactly what a TLC is, and who they are.

Another aspect of community in this model of project-based learning with multimedia is these shared practices. The idea is that everyone is doing the same thing in the same way. I think you have something like a community of professional tennis players that all live in different places, but other tennis players are their main community. They all share this knowledge of who the other tennis players are and who ranks where and technique and method and who

the coaches are. That kind of knowledge is being shared by these teachers. They go to the web sites to get the kind of craft knowledge that they share.

I think a key component is the teachers being brought together to help develop the model themselves rather than having the knowledge come down from on top of the mountain. We want to share it with them, and train them, but they are going to go do it. They are very involved in developing and then teaching one another. Another thing that was part of the original model was that these TLCs would take over—teachers would assume responsibility for their own professional development and development of the model. Our very first summer, where we got the fist bunch of teachers together to start this thing. The next summer the TLCs took responsibility for some of the training. And then by the third summer the whole institute of 120 teachers was designed and conducted by teachers from in the project, with the TLCs being in the lead position. When we add new schools the people who are going to be in the role of TLC are apprenticed to experienced TLCs. We have seven workshops going on in the summer, each one with 20 teachers, each one with one of our experienced lead TLCs assisted by sort of TLCs in training. It's a way for them to get quickly oriented and up to speed so they can be effective the next year in their districts.

What is the role of technology?

We have three ways that teachers are connected. One is the listserv. Another is the discussion site, a bulletin board on our web site. And the third way is the web site itself. They can go there and keep up to date on what is happening in the project. It's kind of an electronic newsletter. Instead of waiting for information you can go there any time and see what the latest news is.

Not many people contribute to the listserv. But there's always something coming in from somebody. All the rest know it's happening and they realize if they wanted to they could quickly and easily be in touch with everyone. I think of it as someone who might be fairly reclusive and sits at home looking out the window, watching the

traffic go by, keeping track of whether Mrs. Smith is home or not. But they know that if they needed to, if they had an emergency, all they'd have to do it go next door and knock. As opposed to living out in the boondocks and there's no one nearby, and I don't know whom I would get if I needed someone.

Many people use the web site, but not a lot participate in the discussion group. Those who do really love it. Another thing the larger Challenge 2000 project did consciously to build community—not for the sake of community but for the sake of teacher reflection and teacher professional development—was to get a teacher network going in Silicon Valley. We had a hard time keeping it going. The only part that is still going is the Multimedia Project part. Two reasons come to mind. One is that maybe our people are early adopters and there are a host of traits that go with that, but the second thing is that our teachers share a very clearly defined bounded thing they have in common, which is this multimedia project. The rest of the teachers had something more general in common—we're all teachers in Silicon Valley, we all have something to do with Challenge 2000. One team might say we're doing something about science learning in our team and this is how we're going to do it. Another might be working on improving primary reading scores and developing their own way of doing it. These groups are working with different agendas and different goals. The level of commonality is they're all trying to break the mold and make some dramatic improvements in some areas. Whereas in the Multimedia Project every team is doing the same thing. When a team comes into the Multimedia Project, they don't get to say "This is what we think we want to do." We say "If you're coming into this and you're going to accept these resources then you're going to help demonstrate and improve this model of instruction." We're all trying to demonstrate this particular model of technology use and instruction in our classrooms. And while they might vary in their content areas, there's a much clearer thing they're trying to do the same. I think it's the difference between getting together a bunch of people and saying we're going to have a sports network or we're going to have a tennis network.

Communities can have hierarchies and different role definitions. We have what reminds me of a kind of crafts system. At first our teachers had been pretty much working on their own, sort of like parallel play in preschool—we're buildings our castles side by side, we're not doing anything together, but we're not fighting. What we did this year was say, "What's the best way to spread our model in the coming year?" The experienced teachers said, "We want to go out and bring in new." And so the model became one where the experienced folk each enlisted one to three colleagues who wanted to join. And they became the first mentor of those folks. The TLCs are now like the master craftsmen, and the experienced teachers are the journeymen or apprentices who haven't quite risen up to the master level yet. And then you're got novices.

Did this partnership model improve learning?

One measure would be improvement in the quality of student projects. Our measure was the percent of exemplary projects. For two years now we've scored final projects using a rubric we developed based on our model. The students come to an interview, present their projects, have a discussion with a panel of judges, and then the judges rate the project using the rubric. That's one way that we've attempted to measure an improvement in the projects the kids are doing. What it attempts to accomplish is not that their store of knowledge will go up. If they were working independently in a teacher-directed class, their store of knowledge might be the same. What we try to do is have value added. They learn the same knowledge, but they also learn some design and communication skills, and collaboration and work skills that they wouldn't have learned otherwise. The first year 22% fell in the exemplary category, and this year 50% did. That's not directly because of the partnership model, but what it does say is the partnership model did not prevent us from improving.

We have evidence of improved learning from a study comparing students in our project classrooms to similar students in non-project classrooms. On a performance assessment, students in Multimedia Project classrooms outperformed their peers on all three dimensions measured: content, design, and audience.

Besides in this student performance data, the impact of the

Multimedia Project is shown in differences in how teachers and students spent their time. For example, project teachers spent far more time coaching students and far less time lecturing. Project students spent more time engaged in complex tasks and collaborating with peers and less time as passive listeners.

As any good researcher knows, just because these results followed implementation of our partnership model, we can't conclude they came because of it. The partnership model was just one of several strategies working in combination. Nonetheless, feedback from the teachers is very positive; they clearly believe the partnership approach was effective for them.

If you want to use electronic tools to help your sense of community what are some things to do?

First I think you look at what you're trying to accomplish, what your time frame is, and what the hurdles are going to be developing the community. If you can accomplish what you're trying to accomplish without building the community, and if it's going to be hard to build the community, then maybe you don't go to great effort to do that. But I definitely think you should develop early on a description of what the community is all about and what the work is. People then understand what they're doing. Even if it's going to be revised, it needs to be there in the beginning so people know what they're joining. We finally got to the point where teachers sign an agreement that the project is committing to do these things. It saves some of the people getting involved and then getting dissatisfied because they didn't know what they were getting involved in. It's like joining the Kiwanis. Service clubs pretty much grow by inviting members. You attend a meeting, a couple of meetings, before they invite you to join. After that, once they think they'd like to have you and they extend the invitation, you have to make up your mind. Make a commitment, join or don't join.

In the very beginning of the Multimedia Project we didn't make it clear what it was that we were inviting people to do. What we found in the first summer institute was a huge range of reasons why people were there. Some of the people were very skilled in technology and very good teachers and some of them had no clue about technology and thought this was a great way to learn. I suspect we even had one or two people who were sent there by principals who wanted to show they were offering them professional development because they were trying to get rid of them. And none of them really had a clue what it is they were getting into. They thought they were getting some technology training and some free stuff. They didn't know they were supposed to become a community of curriculum developers. They thought they were going to sit down and we were going to give them stuff and instead we're putting them to work. In that first year we had dropouts. After that first year, when we made everything clear, we had hardly any dropouts.

There are some simple things you can do in the beginning that can help community grow on its own. Plant the seeds of community that are not time intensive, that are harder to deal with if you try and do them later. Right off the bat I'm thinking about our listserv. Many teachers needed to be hand held and taught how to use it and what it can be used for. Instead of a twenty minute introduction to electronic mail, teach them to mastery. If our teachers had had some experience using that tool and saw what it could do and felt comfortable with it, they might have been able to develop faster. I think our community was built as much or more by the face to face contact, which was much harder and more costly to do.

Another thing I would do differently, if I could start over, is make our web site from the very beginning a password protected space. Two years ago I tried to get teachers to let me put their pictures on our web site and they didn't want their pictures up there. They were smart enough to know that they didn't want their pictures where all the world could go to them. Many of them would be willing to do that if they knew that only the people in our immediate project had passwords to get in. We are moving there now. We have a public area and a private area. That's what we did with our listserv. We made it closed. Nobody who isn't part of the listserv can send to it and no one can get in it by subscribing themselves.

What happens to the community after the grant?

Maybe it's partly because of where we are, but in Silicon Valley spinning off things is an everyday activity. Companies develop units and then they decide to sell it off because it complements something else. We're helping plan for the future so that the community doesn't just suddenly go away. I don't know if the larger structure will go on, but anybody who wants to maintain the community could do so. What's more apt to happen is groups who have gotten to know each other well will maintain contact. I've already tried to move some of the functions into organizations that are ongoing so that the work of the grant can live on. I've moved training into the larger county office of education that already has an Internet institute. We developed our institute as a follow-on for people who had already been through theirs. They can keep doing it without us. As for the web site there's a server that it can go on for very little expense if people want to continue using it. The annual Multimedia Exhibit is now a new division of a statewide festival that already existed and used to just do film and video. There's an obligation in our grant, maybe a moral obligation, that has to do with communities. We don't want to leave them high and dry.

RESOURCES

TOOLS

Challenge 2000 Multimedia Project
http://pblmm.k12.ca.us

Tapped In
http://www.tappedin.org

Foundation for Community Encouragement
http://www.fce-community.org/index.php3

Publications

Gozdz, Kazimierz, editor, *Community Building: Renewing Spirit and Learning in Business*, New Leaders Press, 1995.
http://www.co-i-l.com/btbc/cb/

TIPS

✔ Make areas of your web site password protected so that they are open only to participants. People will sometimes talk more easily online if they know the whole world isn't watching.

✔ A listserv is a good way for people to quickly get in touch with each other, but make it open only to participants.

✔ No one likes to log into a site where nothing is happening.

✔ Be clear! Make sure participants know what they're signing up for.

✔ Give participants enough training so that they can succeed and acquire a sense of mastery, especially in regards to the technology. Encourage mentoring by more skilled participants.

Technology Innovation Challenge Grant Programs

Northeast Cluster

The following is an overview of United States Department of Education's Technology Innovation Challenge Grant programs located primarily in the Northeast. (Due to organizational reasons, occasionally a Cluster member is located elsewhere.) For a description of all Challenge Grant recipients, go to the web site:
http://www.ed.gov/Technology/challenge

American Gateways: Immigration and Migration in the U.S.

information on projects to be added