Jennifer Scagnelli
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Online Collaborative Project – Reflective Summary Paper

I began the semester unsure of what type of collaborative project I would create. Because I'm not a teacher, I felt that I had to approach the development of this project from a different perspective than those who teach might approach it. I don't have experience in the classroom and I'm not very familiar with specific teaching standards. Therefore, I wanted to create a collaborative project that could be used in various ways depending on the learning goals and curriculum standards of each individual participant. My goal was to facilitate communication and collaboration between groups of students who are located across the country and (hopefully) across the world. I chose to focus on an environmental issue, the amount of trash we throw away each week, because I felt that this issue is relevant to people worldwide and it could be used for various teaching activities.

The internet provides great potential for communication and collaborative learning in educational settings, and I felt this was a perfect opportunity to bring together students from across the globe to learn about and discuss an important environmental concern. The purpose of the activity was to share data in an online environment so that classrooms from many parts of the world could connect with one another and share information and ideas about how much garbage they produce, the types of items that they recycle, and the impact that this has on our environment. I wanted to facilitate a project that would help children learn together and from one another about a common issue, one that is of interest to all participants, and allow the students to experience cross-cultural collaboration and communication. I also felt it would be important (and maybe even eye-opening) for students in the United States to see if people in other parts of the world make the same amount of trash as Americans, or if they make more trash or less trash.

There were a few possible ways that the students could have obtained their data, and I spent a fair amount of time trying to decide how the amount of trash should be measured. I decided to have them track how many bags of trash were produced by their household within a one week period of time. It would not have been logical for each student to weigh each bag, so for purposes of the project I assumed that each bag weighed the same as a one-gallon container of milk (8.5 lbs). I found an online weight conversion site and converted pounds to 3.8 kg (and compared it to four liter-size bottles of soda) for the non-American participants so that there would be consistency in the data and it would be easier to calculate averages.

As the project administrator, I began by creating a project website which included all the pertinent project information. My objective was to put together a

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website that was thorough, well organized, and easy to read and navigate. I knew that it didn't have to be especially fancy or elaborate, but I did want the website to be visually appealing and make a good impression on those who viewed it. I created an email form so that registration would be easy for anyone who wanted to participate. The registration information would be sent directly to an email address that I set up specifically for the project. This email address was also displayed on the website in case anyone had questions about the project and wanted to contact me. Since I'm aware that some people don't like to submit information via electronic forms, I also provided the option of registering by emailing me directly with the required information. I didn't want to cause any problems with privacy issues for the participants, so I was careful not to use any last names on the project website (including my own).

I searched the internet for information that I could provide on the website to reaffirm that this is an important, worthwhile project to participate in. There are many websites about environmental issues and recycling, and I referred to those for my "interesting facts" section and to come up with some activities and discussion questions that classes could use with the data collected from the project. I also wanted teachers to let me know if they used the project and data for any other learning activities. My intention was to post these to the website for others to see and possibly replicate with their own classrooms, but I didn't receive any such information.

When I felt that the website was sufficient I uploaded it to my webspace and began to create a call for participation to provide potential participants an overview of my project. I included all pertinent information about the project: title, subject area(s), project summary, procedure, age of participants, timeline, registration information, and contact information. I also made a point to mention on the website (and in the announcements) that this would be an excellent project for classroom Earth Day activities, hoping to stress the value of the project as an educational tool. I knew that I might have to tailor it to fit certain submission guidelines and I wanted to have all of the information ready so that posting it would be as simple as possible. My next step would be to find appropriate places to post my project announcement and hope to find participants.

I started by submitting it to the Global School House projects registry, which had been mentioned in class and seemed to be a well-respected education site with very high visibility. I had no problems submitting it as the guidelines for project announcements were very clear. It had to be approved by a moderator and was soon posted on the projects registry. Education-World looked like it would have been another good option, but I noticed that its collaborative projects community hadn't been updated since 2001. The message boards that I found on education and teaching websites proved to be great places to post my project announcement. I noticed that these message boards really are communities for support and ideas, and there were a lot of regular posters. I

hadn't thought of doing this before, but since I was posting something "official" I took time to read the policies of each message board to be sure that project announcements were appropriate. I was uncertain of two boards, so I contacted the board moderators to be sure that it would be ok to post my announcement. I heard back from one (proteacher.net) who stated that the announcement shouldn't be posted on numerous boards within the site. Two was the maximum that they allowed, so I went ahead and posted on their "BusyBoard" and "Grades 4-8" message boards. I never did hear back from the other (theteacherscorner.net), so I was bold and posted my information anyway. The first time it was flagged as spam because it had a website URL in the body of the message, but I tried again a few weeks later and this time it was cleared by the moderator and posted to their "Seasonal Activities" board.

I also decided to look into listservs as a way of getting my project announcement out to teachers who might be potential participants. My first few tries weren't successful and my emails bounced back when I tried to sign up. I finally was able to join one called KIDPROJ, which is part of KIDLINK (an assortment of email forums used for educational communication among students and teachers through secondary school). I sent my announcement to the listserv, but I initially left off part of the website URL and another person graciously corrected it before I had a chance to do so myself.

During the course of the project I did a lot of waiting and hoping that people would register for the project. I received my first two registrations within a few days of initially posting my project on GSH and the rest trickled in after that. As people began to register for the project I was sure to send each person a confirmation email letting them know that I received their registration and thanking them for participating. Just as someone mentioned in class, I felt that it was important to let each person know that their participation was important to the success of the project. Many of the participants were from different parts of the world (as I had hoped they would be), and I tried to be aware of any "Americanisms" in my email communication that they might not understand.

I decided to put a site counter on my project website so that I could see how many people visited the site and how they got there. While these statistics didn't play a part in the project itself, I found the results to be interesting. At first, the hits mainly came from the educational websites and message boards where I had posted my project announcement. As the weeks passed, I noticed that many people found my project website through Google searches. The downside of being able to see the site statistics was that I could tell that many people had visited the site and I began to second guess myself and wonder why more people weren't interested in registering.

While I didn't have any participants without which my project would not have occurred, I did have two people who played an important role. I received an email from a teacher in South Africa explaining that she would like to participate

in my project as part of certification for EcoSchools. She suggested that I also ask for data about recycling habits, which I had originally considered doing. Information about recycling is extremely important when discussing environmental concerns (specifically waste disposal), but I initially hesitated to ask for recycling data along with the garbage data because I didn't want to get in over my head. Receiving this email reaffirmed my initial belief that recycling data should be included as well, and I updated the project website to reflect this. I did, however, state that submitting recycling data was optional. I didn't want any potential participants to not register because they weren't sure if their students recycle, and the focus of the project (trash production per household) did not change. Unfortunately, I never heard back from the South African teacher and she didn't participate in the project as I had hoped she would.

The second person was someone who read my project announcement on the teachers.net message board. In his reply to my post he encouraged me to post my project to other message boards as well (positive comments are always appreciated!) and said that he included a link to my project website on his own personal education-related webpage. I was very glad that he did, as he provides an excellent collection of links and resources pertaining to Earth Day and the environment. Having my project link on his website led to numerous hits, and perhaps is where one or more of my participants found the project.

To promote interaction among the project participants, I created a project wiki using PBWiki. Participants were provided information about the wiki via email after I received their registration. My hopes were that the participants could share ideas and reflections about recycling and what can be done to reduce the amount of trash that they create. The wiki page was very easy for me to create and content could be easily added to it. I was aware that there was potential for someone to intentionally disrupt the wiki page (especially if I had posted a link to the wiki on the project website), but this wasn't an issue because no one used it at all. In retrospect I'm not sure if a wiki was the best possible way to promote dialogue between the classrooms. Many people are not familiar with wikis and how to use them, and I could have provided more information about this, but perhaps something like a blog might have been a better option. I could have created posts with specific questions or reflection topics and used the comments feature for communication from the participants. I also could have created my own message forum for the project website.

I had approximately 4 months to complete the project, from its conception and development to the calls for collaboration and the project ending. I specified in my project announcements and on the project website that my goal was to have all data submitted by April 9th. This would give me enough time to post everything on the website and compile averages of the data. The project itself was a weeklong activity (seven consecutive days) which could have occurred any time within the 4-month period, depending on when the participants registered and assigned the activity to their class. I left it up to the participants to

integrate this project into their curriculum as they best saw fit, and I think it's safe to assume that it was used mainly for science and/or math lessons. This data collection activity and exchange of information provided classrooms with the potential for in-class assignments, reflection, and critical thinking skills. Because classrooms from different countries participated, the students were able to see if there are variations in amounts of trash and recycling and could form hypotheses as to why there might be differences.

The first thing I would have done differently were I to repeat this project would be to finish the website and begin posting my project announcement a week earlier. Because we had a limited amount of time, I feel that an extra week might have made a bit of a difference, though probably not drastically. I've learned that people need to see a need and a use for collaboration, so I also would have tried harder to motivate teachers to participate by included information about how the project meets curriculum standards. I also feel that I should have sent the participants a second reminder asking them to please submit their data, and it would have been a good idea to feedback from the participants. I still might do this, as I'd like to find out how their thoughts on the project, if they have any suggestions for improvement, and find out if they felt the project was useful and worth their time.

Also, I was hoping for more feedback from people with teaching experience. Being that I'm not a teacher myself, I wasn't sure if my project was as useful as it could have been. I did get participants, and hopefully they found it to be a helpful teaching tool, but feedback and suggestions from teachers who might actually participate in a project like this would have been very welcome, especially at the start of my project. I asked a friend who is a former teacher to look at the website and let me know what she thought of it, but she never got around to doing so. I think this is one of the reasons why feedback from the class (either during our meeting days or by email) is important in developing projects such as this one.

I actually had a harder time finding a project to participate in than I did creating and implementing my own project. Nearly all of the projects that I found required classroom participation. I don't have my own classroom, so those weren't options. I found a very simple project that only involved sending an email message to a teacher whose kindergarten class was celebrating their 100th day of school and wanted to receive 100 emails to plot on a map. While I thought this was a good idea and was happy to help them out, I felt that I needed to join a project that had a little depth more to it. I decided to join the project of a classmate, Steve Patton, and set out to the grocery store to obtain the data that he was asking for. The goal of his project was to connect math concepts to everyday life, provide a means for students to explore various places, and apply and review mathematical concepts that will be on the Gateway exam. Steve didn't require prior registration so I just went ahead and collected the data (with the assistance of an 8 year old friend) and submitted it to him by email.

I really liked how Steve provided a link to Tennessee curriculum standards on his project website, and I thought the site in general was well organized and provided a lot of useful information. I especially liked his "applications" section in which he describes in detail how the data from the project will be used by his own class. If I were a math teacher this would be especially important in helping me decide whether or not to participate in the shopping project. I think teachers will be more apt to participate if they see a project as being useful and relevant to their specific teaching needs and curriculum standards, and it's important to make this apparent in the project website or call for collaboration. The only change that would have made participating in this project a bit easier for me would be to use an email form for data submission, but sending the data by email was quick and easy as well. I'm also glad that my friend's daughter was with me while I found the prices of the specified items, because I think it made her realize that the food we eat each day is not free, and prices vary from place to place. I'm curious to see if she will have any interest in viewing the final results of Steve's project.

Though I would have liked if more registrants had submitted their data, I feel that my project was a success. It enabled students from different classrooms in various locations to complete a relevant, hands-on learning activity, and participants had the opportunity to exchange ideas and information with students across the globe. It has been an interesting and informative process, and I've enjoyed the experience of creating an online collaborative project of my own and using it to foster global interactions among students.

Project Website: http://web.utk.edu/~jenscag/thegarbageproject/

Week 1 January 21	▪ Began thinking of project ideas ▪ Searched collaborative projects online ▪ Began reading articles
Week 2 January 28	▪ Shared project ideas with class, received feedback and decided on project ▪ Worked on project website ▪ Worked on project announcement
Week 3 February 4	▪ Posted project announcement to GSH ▪ Joined listserv (kidproj@listserv.nodak.edu) ▪ Tried to join eduweb.vic.gov.au but had registration problems (error message) ▪ Looked at iearn.org, but there is a $100 fee to join, so I didn't join ▪ Registered for TheTeachersCorner.net account, sent them a message regarding posting policy ▪ Registered for Teachers.Net account, posted to the Project Switchboard and the Earth Day Projects message boards ▪ Registered for ProTeacher account, sent them a message regarding their posting policy ▪ Tried to join IECC but got an error message, will try again ▪ Registered for GreatTeacher.net user account ▪ Posted to GreatTeacher.net (Education Issues message board) ▪ Registered for Scholastic.com account ▪ Received email from teacher in South Africa suggesting that I add recycling info to the project (updated project website to include this). ▪ Found information about Eco-schools program ▪ Participated in project #1 (email) ▪ Received registration from Long Beach, NY ▪ Received registration from Indonesia
Week 4 February 11	▪ Project was posted on someone's personal website ▪ Tried to create an EduWeb account (error message) ▪ Tried to join IECC (another error message) ▪ Received registration from Australia (registered using the data submission form, not the registration form) ▪ Received registration from Great Meadows, NJ ▪ Received registration from Baxter Springs, KS
Week 5 February 18	▪ Posted to TheTeachersCorner.net message board (received spam filter message, wasn't posted) ▪ Searched for project to join ▪ Posted replies to two messages on Teachers.Net ▪ Posted to Teachers.Net Canada and Australia message boards ▪ Received registration from Ontario, Canada ▪ Received registration from Moravia, NY
Week 6 February 25	▪ Searched for project to join

Week 7 March 4	▪ Posted to TheTeachersCorner.net Seasonal Activities message board (successful this time) ▪ Received reply from ProTeacher regarding posting policy ▪ Posted to 2 message boards on ProTeacher (BusyBoard and grades 4-8 board)
Week 8 March 11	▪ Searched for project to join
Week 9 March 18	▪ Received a strange email through the Teachers.Net message board, looked up the IP address
Week 10 March 25	▪ Sent a reminder email to participants asking them to submit their data ▪ 300 hits to website, many of these are from Google searches ▪ Began project summary paper
Week 11 April 1	▪ "Went shopping" for Steve's project
Week 12 April 8	▪ April 9th is the project end date ▪ submitted data for Steve's project ▪ Received registration from Iran
Week 13 April 15	▪ Worked on and completed summary paper and project abstract
Final Class April 21	▪ Class presentations