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Online Mentoring: A Success Story

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Since February 1993, the Internet-based Electronic Emissary Project has been helping teachers locate other Internet account holders who are subject matter experts ("SMEs") in different disciplines, for the purpose of setting up curriculum-based, electronic exchanges among experts, students and teachers. The Electronic Emissary "matches" K-12 teachers and students with professional partners elsewhere in the world, helping them to explore new ways of experiencing collaborative learning in computer-mediated contexts. The project is supported by the Texas Center for Educational Technology and the JC Penney Corporation.

(Does this "sound" interesting to you? Would you like to learn more about the Electronic Emissary Project? If so, we'd suggest that you visit our World Wide Web pages, which are located at:
<http://www.tapr.org/emissary/> before you read any further here.)

For the past three semesters, Barb (the first author of this article) has worked as a facilitator with the Electronic Emissary project. She has assisted about 60 electronic teams to date. Barb is one of three online facilitators currently working with the project. To date, five different educators have served Emissary participants in this way. We would like to share with you some of what we have learned about how to conduct successful, curriculum-based electronic mail exchanges, using one long-term exchange that Barb has assisted as an example.

Barb's role as facilitator is expressed differently with each electronic team, according to team members' interests, past experience, and needs. Although Barb performs certain management tasks with each group, such as making initial contact with the SME and teacher, requesting creation of the team's electronic address of the

project's system developer, and monitoring initial messages, her level of participation in each match varies considerably.

The role of online assistants in Emissary-related computer-mediated communication, as described by two other online facilitators (McGee & Boyd, 1995), includes three main types of action: moderation, mediation, and facilitation. Of the three, Barb tends to concentrate most on the process of facilitation. Moderation and mediation are secondary in importance and frequency, probably due to the way that the Emissary project is structured. (Have you gone to explore our WWW pages yet, if you don't yet know how the project is structured?) Barb finds that most groups with which she works need her to function as more of an overseer than a moderator or mediator. Barb helps electronic teammates with initial communication, reminds them of deadlines, "visits" by e-mail regularly to keep the groups on task, sends a "check-in message" if there hasn't been any online traffic for a few days, and follows up on any technical problems encountered by the group.

The "Arthur" Partnership

We would like to share with you the story of one Emissary team that began communicating in early 1995, and is still exchanging messages today. This is an unusual "match" for the Emissary project, in that it paired up Jannah Piasetsky, a 10-year old student working on an extracurricular project who lives in a small town in Connecticut, with Dr. Sigmund Eisner, a 74-year-old English Professor Emeritus at the University of Arizona. The match was requested by Jannah's parents because Jannah had some academic interests that were not part of her school's curriculum. We would like you to experience a bit of what happened during the project--virtually, of course. <grin>

Here are some excerpts from the many messages that Jannah and Dr. Eisner exchanged. We have chosen parts that will illustrate, we hope, the way that information, ideas, and feelings were exchanged online.

From: Jannah

I have a lot that I want to learn about King Arthur and the Knights. I will list some of my interests.

I am interested in learning more about Sir Launcelot and Elaine (one of the chapters I have left to read is about Elaine).

I am interested in learning more about Sir Tristram and King Mark. I wonder why King Mark hated Sir Tristram and why he killed him?

I would like to learn more about La Cote Mal Taile. How did he avenge his father's death?

I also would like to find out who were these people really. I think that there really was a King Arthur. How much is the story like his life? Were there also knights of the round table? Were the knights in the stories based on real people and did they actually do great deeds? I would love to read about the real people and maybe compare that with the stories I have read about them.

From: Dr. Eisner

Let's postpone Lancelot and Elaine for a few days. I want to do a bit of homework on them first. King Mark didn't always hate Sir Tristram. What happened is that Tristram and Iseult, King Mark's wife, accidentally drank a love potion (magic medicine) together. Then Tristram and Iseult fell in love with each other.

King Mark, who was Iseult's husband, was not happy. In time, in the version which you read, King Mark killed Tristram. But that's not the only ending to the story. In some versions the ending went this way. Tristram knew that he shouldn't love Iseult. So he left King Mark's court in Cornwall and went to Brittany. (Look on a map to find out where Cornwall and Brittany are). In Brittany he married another princess. But that marriage was unhappy too. One day Tristram was wounded in battle. He knew that only Iseult could cure him of his wound. He asked a ship captain to go to Cornwall and bring back Iseult. He told the ship captain that if he came back with Iseult, he

should have white sails on his ship. But if Iseult refused to leave Cornwall, the captain should come back with black sails. Iseult did come, but Tristrem's wife told Tristrem a lie. She said that the ship had black sails. Tristrem then turned his face to the wall and died. Iseult landed, learned of Tristrem's death, and she too died. King Mark came and had them buried side by side. From Iseult's grave grew a rose and from Tristrem's grave grew a briar. These met and intertwined. No man could ever part them.

Now, how do you like that for an ending?

For your next homework get an atlas and learn where these places are today: Cornwall, London, Winchester, and Brittany. When you learn where they are, write me a posting telling me where they are. Then I'll have more things for you to do.

From: Jannah

Dear Dr. Eisner,

I found out that London is the capital city of England. Cornwall is in the southwest part of England and is good for mining. Winchester is also in England. Brittany is on the west edge of France. I also found two extra cities: Caerleon is on the river Usk in England and Astolat is called Guilford today. Is there a Guilford in England or France?

The Launcelot and Elaine story is a sad one. Maybe as sad as Sir Tristram's. One of Launcelot's cousins, Sir Bors, had wounded Launcelot, without knowing it! Elaine didn't know Launcelot's name until Gawaine told her. It is sad that Elaine dies just because Launcelot said that he wouldn't marry her.

How did Iseult cope with her love for Sir Tristram while she was married to King Mark?

From: Dr. Eisner

Hi, again: How did Iseult cope with her love for Tristan while she was married to King Mark? Well, the truth is that she didn't love King Mark very much. He was sort of a pill, and her marriage to him was an arranged marriage. Besides, he was much older than she was. You know how these things are.

Benefits

Jannah really enjoyed the intellectual stimulation and individual attention that she received from Dr. Eisner, as her comments upon her involvement in the exchange show. She said,

I learned a lot about King Arthur and his Knights, which is what I really wanted. I really liked it that I worked with someone, like Dr. Eisner, who understood what I said and didn't ever say that I shouldn't do so much. I also liked that when I asked a question, he would answer my question in the next posting, or, if he didn't have the information, he would tell me that he would get it as soon as possible.... and he meant it! He also treated me more like an adult and it was OK if I didn't understand something, I could ask him. Dr. Eisner is a nice man and has interesting things to say. I really like talking with him (on e-mail) and, if I don't hear from him in a long time, I get worried.

We also thought it interesting that Jannah chose to compare her experience of Dr. Eisner's electronic mentoring with her overall perceptions of learning in a classroom situation.

For me, it was very different from being in a classroom. I liked that I didn't have to compete with other kids for computer time or to compete to have my questions answered by Dr. Eisner. I liked how quickly Dr. Eisner responded to my questions and gave me so much information about the characters in the stories I was reading. E-mail was often quicker for me than getting back my teacher's comments on my reports in the classroom. I liked it when Dr. Eisner complimented me on my vocabulary or on the questions I was asking. I believe that he

really meant it and I felt that he was listening to me and taking his work with me seriously.

Dr. Eisner enjoyed interacting with Jannah partly because it drew him back into active exploration of an area of academic interest, but mostly because he returned the respect and affection that Jannah so clearly communicated to him. He said,

There were two [benefits] I can think of right now. The first, and by far the most important was a friendly relationship with a lively, interesting, and interested ten-year-old. Jannah is a fascinating person in her own right. Her list of accomplishments involving intelligent activities is incredible. Lifetime teachers (and I am one) long for pupils like Jannah and count their blessings when one appears. The second benefit is that I went back to my old Arthurian studies, which I had ignored for many years, and, thanks to Jannah's questions, found myself deep in the Arthurian lore while learning all over again what a fascinating area of study that is.

The whole process was many lessons learned, as far as I was concerned. I have never had such an interesting e-mail correspondence, and I think I learned something with every posting. Certainly I was lucky to have such a bright and inquisitive pupil.

We think that it is particularly important that *both* participants in this exchange independently reported much learning *and* teaching experienced, even though one correspondent is 64 years older than the other, and has devoted much time to the study of the topic of the online exchange.

Jannah's parents enjoyed watching their daughter learn and grow intellectually, as these comments show.

We gained the distinct pleasure of watching our daughter immerse herself in an area of her interest and have the opportunity to interact with someone from whom she was motivated to learn. We also benefited in being able to observe the many ways in which Jannah's enthusiasm for learning and

sharing with the SME (Dr. Eisner) extended into her activities outside of the E-mail exchanges. That is, Jannah was inspired to seek out new sources of information and to share, with the SME, her insights and "discoveries." We also benefited in observing the importance of an educator's sensitivity and praise, even to a most able student, like Jannah. This is how we envisioned the education process to be, at its best.

We learned how valuable it is to a developing mind to have a mentor who: can gauge the student's level of understanding and address and stimulate thinking commensurate with intellectual readiness; while, separately, assessing the student's emotional needs and providing (age) appropriate forms and frequency of support and encouragement.

Not surprisingly, even the "adjunct participants" in an online educational exchange learn powerful and unique lessons.

What made this match work so well?

Many successful matches have been made through the Electronic Emissary project, involving classroom-wide, individual student-to-expert and small-group exchanges. Almost 300 electronic teams have been formed and followed (for research purposes) since early 1993. Some of the patterns that we have seen occurring in other successful matches include many of the same aspects that made this match work well:

- Clear purpose and topic(s) for the exchange
- Motivated student with active support for participation from adults
- Committed expert with a genuine interest in teaching
- Evidence of a developing personal friendship among the expert, student(s), and teachers or parents involved

Recommendations

By sharing the story of Jannah and Dr. Eisner, we do *not* mean to imply that mutually beneficial electronic mentoring can only, or even best, occur outside of the classroom setting. Our experience with the many matches formed and facilitated by the Emissary to date has

shown us the remarkable adaptability of this educational telecomputing activity structure (Harris, 1995).

Instead, we have learned that key attributes of planning, organizing, and communicating within online exchanges are important to successful electronic mentoring. These are listed below.

- Ensure reliable access to e-mail.
- Have a clear goal for the project; build it into your curriculum. Keep this goal in mind as you prepare and read e-mail messages.
- Allow enough time for participation. Some things to consider include: Do students have access to their own e-mail accounts, or must they all use the teacher's account? If they will be using the teacher's account, who will send and receive the mail? Students? Teachers? Parent volunteers? Students (especially younger ones) are often slow typists, but enjoy the activity. Build time into your plans for this.
- Make a schedule, and keep to it. Or, keep in close contact with other participants if you must change the schedule.
- Keep the communication lines open. We have found that experts need to know how your students are reacting to their messages. Are they communicating clearly? Is their language too complex for your students to understand? Are the ideas presented too simply? Or are the conceptual levels and communicative textures just right?

SMEs are operating in a virtual communications vacuum, so it is up to the teacher to provide feedback on the appropriateness of message tone, length, vocabulary, content, and process-related ideas. As Leisa Winrich, a teacher of learning disabled students in Wisconsin and long-time Emissary participant, wrote to Bob Brown, a geographer and manager of a Large Geographic Information System at the South Florida Water Management District:

Feel free to ask for clarification. Your writing style to kids (re-your weather) is great. Short paragraphs, easy language--perfect. They still can learn new vocabulary--it's just the

presentation that has to be tailored to their learning. All aspects in creating a REAL environment, like the *Velveteen Rabbit*.

Curriculum Content and Process Benefits

Online communication is writing with an authentic and motivating purpose, since there is a real (and interesting) audience for whom the messages are crafted. Many of the Emissary's participating teachers have observed that involvement in online exchange helps students to improve upon writing and communications skills. In addition, students learn in the content area common to the SME and the curriculum focus of the project planned by the teacher, expert and online facilitator. Leisa, for example, told us:

The students strive to "write good pictures" for the SME and the result has been an incredible improvement in communications skills.

The participating experts in the Emissary project sometimes report similar learning on their own levels. As Dr. Eisner reflected:

E-mail is something I discovered a few years ago and have been fascinated by it ever since. It has made letter writers out of many of us. The art of writing long letters has almost disappeared since its days of glory in the nineteenth century. E-mail has resurrected this skill. It does for me what a telephone can never do and yet is as fast as a telephone. Furthermore, it goes everywhere. You have uncovered another excellent use for e-mail, which I suspect is still in its infancy.

How do we know that these mentorings were successful? *Everyone* learned.

Acknowledgements

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Management District, for sharing their communications and reflections so generously with us.

If you would like to be notified when the future "matches" are available via the Electronic Emissary Project, send an e-mail message stating that request to Judi at: jbharris@tenet.edu .

References

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