Community based ICT solutions to school linking: lessons from the Young People’s Commission for Africa

Trine Petersen reports on a project which used community based software to link schools in Africa and the UK and evaluates participation, focus and impact.

Introduction

Four years ago, Africa Bookcase developed a unique community based software for school linking. The development of this software, named Gemini, grew from dissatisfaction with traditional ‘pen-pal’ based links which were seen to have limited educational value as well as a lack of immediacy. Early tests of the software showed that it was advantageous to link schools through a multilateral community rather than traditional bilateral links as this encouraged maximum interaction and participation as well as offering a wider perspective on a given area of study. Community based projects also meant that there was less disappointment if a school abandoned a project or was unable to participate fully due to limited resources. The software focuses on using ICT to improve curriculum skills and processes and is therefore a useful tool for teaching and learning.

The Young People’s Commission for Africa

The Young People’s Commission for Africa (YPCfA) was a joint venture of Plan UK and Africa Bookcase. The project was designed with two main objectives in mind:

1) to gain an insight into the perspective of young people on the issues facing Africa in line with the Commission for Africa; and

2) to improve knowledge of Africa in students in both the UK and Africa, developing global citizenship, promoting multicultural awareness, addressing development issues and dispelling myths and stereotypes of the continent.

The project involved 25 schools in Africa and 25 schools in the UK, working collaboratively using Gemini Plus, the latest version of the web-based software, which allows students across the world to communicate and collaborate on curriculum-based projects. It is specially designed to make the most of each school’s available ICT resources and can operate effectively on low quality phone lines and poor quality computers. The innovative Multiple User System allows up to five pupils to use one workstation simultaneously and up to four PCs can share a standard telephone modem line, thus realising the full potential of computer rooms with limited facilities. The software contains a plethora of media rich collaborative tools, including email, forums, meeting rooms, instant messaging, video conferencing and a unique drag and drop ‘webpage’ design tool, all of which allow maximum interaction and creativity on collaborative projects.

The YPCfA was divided into four main stages and facilitation was provided for teachers and students throughout the course of the project, which ran between January and May 2005. Curriculum linked lesson plans were provided for teachers along with training in use of the software. In the first stage, participants familiarised themselves with the software by creating personal pages and a webpage for their school. In the second stage they were asked to produce mind maps of Africa which were shared with other schools and discussed using chat rooms, forums and email. This allowed UK students to reassess their impressions of Africa and African students were able to compare their views of Africa with that of other African students and also to act as ‘ambassadors’ for their country and Africa.

I thought everywhere is poor, but it’s not. (Student, UK)

The project was good because you get to learn a lot more about Africa. I only used to know the countries that have football and cricket teams. (Student, UK)

I would definitely do the project again as it is interesting and fun and you get to see other peoples perspective of Africa and even educate them to what it is really like. (Student, South Africa)

I enjoyed sharing my views of our continent with people overseas, and I realised that many of them don’t really know what is happening in the countries in Africa (or where they are). (Student, Ghana)

It is not clear to what extent this stage managed to alter perceptions of Africa on a deeper level but it certainly provoked thought and discussion as the mind maps produced were extremely varied.

In stage three, participants conducted independent research into the challenges facing young people in Africa and each school identified the five challenges which they thought were most pressing, through a classroom vote. The facilitators collated the results and created a list of the top ten challenges identified by all the participants and schools were allocated a challenge for further study. In stage four the schools were put into groups of five which then explored the challenges identified, uploading the work they produced onto the software system to be shared with others. Digital cameras were provided for schools in Africa in order to enhance their work.

Throughout the various stages of the project participants were able to put questions to a number of ‘hot seats’ who were then interviewed by project staff and the video
Interviews were uploaded onto the system. Interviewees included African footballers (including Jay Jay Okocha and Nwankwo Kanu) whose experiences and views helped to build a more positive image of Africa, UK MPs (including Charles Clarke and Paul Boateng) and African high commissioners and ambassadors who were questioned on policies and attitudes related to Africa. Cherie Blair also answered questions from the students on development issues in Africa, from her perspective as a mother. Finally students were able to put questions to experts and professionals working in fields related to the various issues they had identified.

**Evaluation**

At the time of writing the project is in its final stage and only a preliminary evaluation has been conducted. However, a number of lessons have been learned from the project which is the first coordinated by Africa Bookcase linking this number of schools.

**Participation**

The first major issue to consider in any project linking schools in developed countries with schools in developing countries using ICT resources: there will be a divergence in the levels of resources available to participating schools, affecting the speed at which they complete the various stages. This problem can be overcome in the short-term by producing lesson plans with a number of extra activities for schools which are working more quickly and also by creative facilitation, arranging alternative ICT facilities when the facilities available are down. Other solutions which have been successfully employed in projects in areas where there is no electricity or telephone connection are the use of rechargeable laptop computers and relevant websites on CD-ROM (Leach 2003).

In the longer term, there needs to be a more structured approach to arranging resources for participating schools. The success of this type of project is dependent on how effectively schools are able to communicate. For this reason it would be useful if participating schools were encouraged to develop fundraising schemes which would allow them to acquire resources including internet connections and generators, to avoid their progress being hampered by lack of equipment or power failures. Schools should try to identify ICT ‘champions’ able to forge links with parents, donors and the local community as well as other schools with existing ICT facilities. Schools should also be aided in identifying income generating activities to help recover running costs. Finally, schools should continually assess the effectiveness of their computer usage and how to improve it (Cawthera 2002).

These types of measures would enable more schools to participate as, although the Gemini Plus software works on even the most basic computers and connections, schools which have neither are not able to participate in this type of project. Sponsored access to internet cafes or other ICT facilities was provided for a number of schools on this project in order to encourage maximum participation but is obviously not a sustainable solution.

**Focus**

Perhaps the most positive aspect of the Gemini software is that its primary focus is on curriculum skills and processes rather than ICT skills, which empowers teachers to use ICTs purposefully and effectively in the classroom, enabling new forms of teaching and learning. The software adds another dimension to teaching through the use of digital photography, video, ‘hot seats’, interaction with other schools and the use of software for creative purposes.

*This project was very interesting because of the use of the digital camera. WebPages became more interesting and the project got a whole new dimension!* (Teacher, South Africa)

The feedback received from the teachers on this was very positive. The software allowed them to improve teaching and a number of teachers claimed that the creative aspects meant that the students had greater ownership of the project and there was often more participation than usual within the classroom as a result of the students’ enthusiasm about using the software. The fact that the project coincided with the ‘Commission for Africa’ also fuelled the students’ interest.

**Impact**

Aside from feedback from the participants, a significant measure of the success of the YPCfA is the wider impact beyond participating schools, which is difficult to assess at this early stage. However, the work produced throughout the project will be used to widen the project’s impact as it will be published on a website which can be used as an educational resource for other schools. Hard copies of the work produced will also be made available.

**Conclusion**

The YPCfA has been the most successful Gemini project to date. In this project the community aspect of the software worked particularly well, and the tools provided by the software increased the level of creativity and interaction of the participants. The wider impact of the project still remains to be seen but it has demonstrated the value of ICT projects focusing on developing teaching methods and processes rather than just ICT skills, which can be employed in future larger scale initiatives. Future projects of this nature should also adopt a multi-pronged approach to the recruitment of schools in developing countries in order to maximise participation.

**References**


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