

The Bridging Influence of Technology and Collaboration

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As Media Specialists, we often hear the phrase, “Technology is just a tool; integration should be the focus.” Of course I knew integration was the ultimate goal for using any technology, but I always seemed to be instructing staff or students in the “how to” of new equipment or software. When I WAS able to move beyond helping students or staff feel comfortable, many of the next steps still fell short of true integration. But finally, a teacher and I began to develop a project that took “integration” to a new level for me.

It began with discussions of the racial tensions in our community. A river not much wider than 50 feet in certain parts separates the communities of St. Joseph and Benton Harbor in Southwest Michigan. Although they are referred to as the “Twin Cities”, the communities themselves are very different. The biggest differences are in racial makeup and socio-economic levels. These two communities were the focus of national attention in the summer of 2003 when civil unrest in Benton Harbor brought news media from all across the country.

After all the negative publicity, a fourth grade teacher in my building and myself were encouraged by the desire of both communities to create more opportunities for dialogue between the two towns. The tensions had been well documented even before the June 2003 disturbances. Acclaimed and award winning author Alex Kotlowitz published [The Other Side of the River](#) in 1998 that investigated the racially charged death of a black Benton Harbor teenager whose body was recovered in the St. Joseph River. Two documentaries were shown shortly afterwards; “Twin Cities: Understanding the Issues”

by WNIT in South Bend, Indiana, and “Tale of Two Cities” produced by Michigan Public Broadcasting. And after the summer riots, Jesse Jackson came to speak to the St. Joseph High School students.

With all this as background, both communities escalated the need for programs and opportunities to bring a sense of unity to the two cities. When teacher, Linda McConville, and I began to talk about the fourth grade focus on Michigan, we found ourselves eager to collaborate with another fourth grade - specifically one in the neighboring district of Benton Harbor. The only way we could realistically accomplish this was to utilize distance learning. We refined our idea into a research project we titled *Voices of Twin Cities Past*. In this project we would utilize distance learning to unite two diverse fourth grade classes and impact their learning about the history of our two neighboring communities. The specific program would teach and use the Big6 research model to learn about important individuals from the past who made a difference in our twin city history. We would focus on schools and parks that the students attended or frequented.

Although both the St. Joseph Schools and the Benton Harbor Schools had the capability of hosting distance learning, the equipment resided at the respective high schools. So Linda and I applied for, and received, a Rotary grant that made it possible to purchase distance learning equipment for an elementary building in both Benton Harbor and St. Joe schools. Our grant was the single largest grant the Benton Harbor / St. Joseph Rotary had ever given to one recipient!

Completing the grant form helped give us the structure the grant needed. We were asked to document measurable outcomes and to describe our methods of evaluation.

We cited benchmarks from the fourth grade Michigan Social Studies Curriculum that addressed Historical Perspective, Comprehending the Past, Analyzing and Interpreting the Past, Diversity of People, Places and Cultures, Inquiry, Information Processing, and Conducting Investigations.

After receiving the grant, we met with our Benton Harbor colleagues and formed the members of the team. It consisted of a fourth grade teacher from each district, a media specialist (I would work with both districts as Benton Harbor did not have elementary media specialists), tech coordinators from each district, the social studies chairman from Benton Harbor, the tech facilitator from Benton Harbor, and parent volunteers.

The team met regularly during the first semester and visited the local public libraries and the Historical Museum to research possible names and to collect available information. After our grant was publicized in the local paper, community members sought us out with historical information and stories they had.

The team reached two conclusions quickly. To create enthusiasm for the classes, we decided, first, to narrow the focus to namesakes of the school buildings the children attended, the namesakes of the respective football stadiums, and local parks the children frequented. Second, we realized the research sources were written for adults. We needed a plan to help fourth graders understand the complex vocabulary and sentence structure in these books and documents.

The team developed a pre and posttest that were given as part of our assessment to determine students' knowledge of local namesakes. We also developed a rubric and organizer incorporating the Big6 research process. Each school would focus on the

namesake of their local school and football stadium. Since the entire community utilized the beach parks, we divided them randomly between the two schools.

As Media Specialist, I rotated between the two buildings teaching the Big6 research process via distance learning to the other class. The first three steps of Task Definition, Information Seeking Strategies and Location and Access were taught to both classes simultaneously. Steps 4 (use of Information) and Step 5 (Synthesis) were done with parent volunteers at the independent schools. Because of the difficult reading level of the research material, parents read the selections aloud as the students followed along. Using highlighters, students underlined relevant ideas and sentences and worked as teams to synthesize the information into sentences recorded on their organizers.

A goal of the grant was to create a final project written in fourth grade language about the namesakes from our twin cities' past. Students took pictures of the selected sites and created a historical postcard for each building, park and stadium. These postcards are now bound and will reside in each fourth grade classroom and media center.

To complete Step 6 of the Big6 process, Evaluation, we used distance learning again to share our results of the research. The students also talked about their reactions to "working together" electronically.

We have just completed the first year. The team will admit we had struggles: the historical information was sketchy and difficult to locate, and we ran out of time on some goals such as having the students learn and use interviewing skills to interview residents of the community and relatives of the namesakes for information. But the successes far outweighed the difficulties. The classes "connected" spontaneously at other times for

projects. They met in real time for a field trip for *Calling All Colors*, and the parent volunteers were dedicated and took the project to heart.

Though technology underlay the project, it was never a focus. Everyone on the team is excited to repeat the project this year with new fourth graders and expand the list of names we research. We plan to publish our project in more formats such as trifolds, videos, CDs, and Web pages and distribute it in more places accessible to the community.

Hopefully, other teachers and media specialists will use this idea in many other ways. Digital connectedness gets ever easier to use and travel budgets for field trips gets ever tighter. At home, students watch news broadcasts each day where journalists connect to far reaching sites. Though the river that separates Benton Harbor and St. Joseph is often cited as what divides the two communities, we have found technology and collaboration is an exciting and vital bridge.