Canada (British Columbia)

Elementary Connected Classrooms

This is a pilot project in which three mixed-age classrooms (years 4 to 7) from three elementary schools participate in videoconferencing, online collaborative work, online literature circles, and exchange of student-created multimedia content. Because of its success in dissolving geographical boundaries and meeting the needs of declining enrolment and rural isolation, the project will be expanded to other classes and schools shortly. Weekly videoconferences of the three classes are delivered by teachers who have a focus area based on their expertise and interest and also manage a complimenting online forum. The conferences are collaborative, with students interacting through verbal questions, sharing smart board work, and communicating in online forums, chat rooms, and by sending messages to each other and their teachers. Each year, there are face-to-face gatherings of all students in each participating school. The project is introduced in a family night with a live videoconference of all schools, and ends with a celebration session with similar set-up. Parents can access the online platform to get an idea of the students' work.

Main focus of innovation: RESOURCES, ORGANISATION, CONTENT

Other keywords: blended/non-formal, technology-rich

General Information

Name of the ILE: Elementary Connected Classrooms

Location/Address: School District 74 (Gold Trail) 400 Hollis Road, PO Bag 250 Ashcroft, BC V0K 1A0

ILE submitted by: Brooke Haller, a leader of this case

Rationale
Why do you suggest that it should be included in the project? How does it respond to 21st century learning challenges?

The Elementary Connected Classrooms project meets the criteria defining cases as an "innovative learning environment". This project exists in three elementary classrooms with students from grades 4-7 students. It is an intentional departure from the traditional approach to education in its approach to technology and instruction; it has been an extremely successful pilot project in its district. Three teachers collaborate to combine their classrooms via daily videoconferencing, online collaborative work, and have students create a variety of multimedia content. This is a full time learning environment that is funded by a public school district, and is planning to expand the project to a second team of next fall. As collaboration lies at the core of the project, Connected Classrooms enjoys a broad organisational foundation and promises sustainability. In addition, the project has proved to increase the learning experience for students in a school district with a high proportion of Aboriginal students. Throughout the course of the project, we have witnessed new and exciting learning relationships and partnerships between students, and increased engagement and motivation to learn.

Learning Aims / Intended Learning Outcomes of the ILE
What are the core learning aims and which knowledge, skills or attitudes are to be acquired? (These may include outcomes related to learners' social, interpersonal, or meta-cognitive development)

Elementary Connected Classrooms works with the following four key goals in mind:
-    To enhance digital literacy of elementary students through the seamless use of transformative technology
-    To broaden the learning community between geographically distant students and create new learning partnerships both within and outside of our district
-    To develop literacy skills and foster a love for reading through the use of online literature circles
-    To create project-based learning experiences that are interdisciplinary and promote collaboration, creativity, critical thinking and cross-cultural understanding

The project hopes to foster 21st century mindsets in students, and does this through the skills and applications of the British Columbia curriculum. As the project encompasses a variety of grades, much of the focus has been on English Language Arts outcomes, Social Studies Outcomes, Fine Arts outcomes and the use of technology. Much of the work in the project is inquiry and project based and relies on critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity.

Learners
Which group(s) of learners is it aiming at? Who is eligible to take part? How many learners are there? What are their ages?

The project focuses on students in grades 4-7, ranging in age from 9-13. Three classrooms are involved: two are grade 4/5 classrooms, and the third is a grade 6/7 classroom. Over half of the students within the project are of Aboriginal Nations ancestry. All of the students who would normally be in any of the teacher's classrooms are involved, and the project is expanding next year to make the Connected Classrooms experience available to all elementary schools within our school district. The three classrooms in the project are highly intertwined, despite each school being roughly an hour's drive apart from the other; videoconferencing and online programs have dissolved geographical boundaries.

Elementary Connected Classrooms is one of many initiatives within the district designed to meet the needs of declining enrolment and rural isolation through technology and instructions; models exist within secondary schools as well. This year, there is also an English 8 connected classrooms that links secondary classrooms in English 8, as well as a variety of shared learning initiatives at the secondary level.

Facilitators
Who are the teachers/facilitators? Who are the leaders? What are their professional backgrounds? What are their roles?

Elementary Connected Classrooms receives support at a variety of levels within the school district. The current impetus is driven by three core classrooms teachers, the principals at each school site, and the district superintendent.

Connected Classrooms Teacher Leader: Brooke Haller, Lytton Elementary School
Core Classroom Teacher: Aislinn Mulholland, Ashcroft Elementary School
Core Classroom Teacher: Errin Gregory, Cayoosh Elementary School
Supporting Principals: Denise O'Connor (Lytton Elementary School), Grant Reilly (Ashcroft Elementary School), Deborah Ralston (Cayoosh Elementary School)
District Superintendent: Teresa Downs

The three core teachers come from a variety of educational backgrounds and teach based on their expertise and passions. Expertise ranges from children's literature, technology fostering active citizenship, global education, fine arts, to writing. Teachers collaborate in three to four face-to- face collaboration days yearly,

monthly videoconferencing meetings, and daily email communication. While teachers lie at the core of the project, its success has depended on strong and continued support from school and district administrators.

Organization of the ILE
How is learning organised? How do learners and facilitators interact? What kind of pedagogy do they follow? What curriculum is used?

The learning is organized by the three core teachers who collaborate and plan the outcomes of the year. Each teacher takes a focus area based on their expertise and passions, and sculpts lessons and activities around their expert areas. Each teacher delivers and facilitates a weekly videoconference lesson in their area, and manages an online forum that compliments the work. The nature of the videoconferences is highly collaborative; students engage in activities that are constructivist and require both creativity and critical thinking. There are opportunities at each site to share frequently throughout the videoconferences, and we have noticed a high degree of engagement. Students find it exciting to have such a tangible audience for their thoughts; videoconferences include all three sites, and roughly 70 students are participating. Learners and facilitators interact through verbal questions and sharing, sharing smart board work via Brigit, and engaging in online forums and chat rooms together. Moodle has become a powerful communication and sharing tool; students frequently message each other and their teachers, and engage deeply in discussion forums. Participants also communicate by sharing the multimedia content created by students and facilitators at each site (videos, photography, prezis, powerpoints, etc.).While learners mostly work with partners or groups at their home sites during videoconferences, many opportunities exist for learner to collaborate at the cross-site level in discussions and during projects.

The teachers within the project have expressed a commitment to ongoing professional development, and hold collaborative, constructivist pedagogies. While the sequencing differs from activity to activity, often lessons follow the structure of connect, process and transform with ample opportunity for student talk time and collaboration. Teacher facilitators provide frequent formative assessment within moodle forums and offer descriptive feedback in forum responses and moodle messages. Aside from host forums, teachers at each site are responsible for assessment of the students at their site by agreed upon assessment methods and criteria. Students also take ownership in their own learning by establishing and following criteria for projects and moodle responses. The three classes have sculpted a set of Technology Performance standards that students and teachers use regularly to assess progress. The team is in the process of developing a reporting insert that comments more deeply of the students' use of transformative technology.

Learning Context
In which context does learning take place? What does the physical learning environment look like? Are community resources used to facilitate learning and how?

Each classroom in the project is equipped with:

- videoconferencing equipment
- smart board
- wireless microphone for school-to-school sharing
- class set of net books
- class set of headphones
- at least three digital cameras

Students engage in four teacher-facilitated videoconferencing lessons a week based on the teacher's area of expertise and passion. Students participate daily on a shared moodle site; they engage in online literature circles, weekly forums (current events, math logic, reading power deep thinking questions) and collaborate on a year-long inquiry project.

One of the biggest successes of the project has been the increase of motivation and joy of reading that result from several sets of online literature circles throughout they year. The project has ensured that adequate resources exist to compile a rich variety of texts available at each site for these literature circles ranging from novels, picture book, non-fiction, and Aboriginal content to reach a variety of readers.

Struggling readers at sites have the opportunity to have audio books purchased when the text appeals to them but is beyond their reading level.

Students, over the course of the year, learn to navigate digital software and learn to create a variety of multimedia content for the purposes of collaboration, sharing across sites, and demonstrations of learning. The physical environment varies from class to class, yet all students sit in partners and groups to encourage collaboration. Student generally spread about the classroom and find spaces where they work best during independent practice time. The classrooms have a variety of pillows, student centers, and spaces to accommodate where they best work.

Learning takes place in cross-cultural and social contexts. It has been extremely exciting to see new learning partnerships forged that help to create cross cultural understandings. The culture of each school is unique, and students are building understanding of the distant communities within the school district. There are three face-to-face gatherings a year for the students of the project; each community hosts a gathering. The focus of these gatherings is two-fold; we hope to build an understanding of the differences and similarities of our communities, and we hope to build relationships.

Visiting students learn new insights about the host community, and gatherings generally take place both at the host school and at a community facility. Facilities and venues within the host communities have been supportive of the project and have made facilities available for students to gather at. It is thrilling to watch new friendships form that would not have previously existed; often after the gatherings students will message each other and continue communications. This has led to a larger community within the project, and builds a level of comfort for students to share.

Activities also play on the need for student talk time and emphasize the collaborative nature of learning. Teachers model the value of collaboration for students, and students engage in group projects and collaboration daily. In every lesson, students are expected and encouraged to draw on the insights of their peers and share their own valuable insights. Combining varying insights has led to students being capable constructors of their own learning.

Parents have been extremely supportive of Connected Classrooms, and are involved at several levels. We launch the year with a Connected Classrooms Family Night, where we explain the scope and sequence of the year via a live videoconference at all three sites and this allows parents to get a feel for the project. We will end the year by having a Celebration of Learning in a similar format: a live videoconference where students at all sites share the successes of the year with family. Parents are also invited to browse our moodle site regularly and are given a guest login so that they can keep current with the work of the project.

History of ILE
Who initiated it? For what reasons was it started and with what purpose? Have these changed since?

Elementary Connected Classrooms is currently in its second year of implementation. It was created by School District 74 in attempt to bridge new learning partnerships between students in a geographically isolated district and increases the level of technological competence and 21st century mindsets for elementary-aged students. The district realized a need to embrace transformative technology while encouraging teacher collaboration and constructivist pedagogy. While leadership of the project has shifted, the project's goals have been maintained and deepened to reflect 21st century learning initiatives.

Funding of the ILE
How is it funded?

The project is currently funded by the school district. The leader of the project is responsible for the Elementary Connected Classrooms portfolio and is a member of the District Student Achievement Team. The team has requested additional funds for next year as we plan to expand the project to include a second team. The bulk of the costs are books for literature circles, teacher collaboration and professional development, and new technologies. The district has been very supportive of the project. The district

recognizes the need for innovation in times of declining enrolment and understands the challenges that rural, isolated schools face. Elementary Connected Classrooms is one of several projects designed to meet our district's changing needs through technology and instruction.

Learning Outcomes
What are the learning outcomes achieved by the ILE, including academic, social, interpersonal and meta-cognitive outcomes? How is learning assessed?

Aside from the ongoing assessment of learning by classroom teachers, the project has used several methods of assessment to gauge the success of the program on a larger level. Teachers and students assess and self assess process throughout the year through the use of our own technology Performance Standards.

In addition, as a great deal of instruction focuses on literacy skills, we have also assessed the progress of the students within the project my measuring the gains seen in district assessment data: fall to spring School Wide Writes and Reading Assessments.

The team is developing a reporting insert that focuses on the goals of Connected Classrooms: use of technology, creativity, inquiry and collaboration skills.

Documentation describing or evaluating the ILE
Is there documentation on this learning environment? Is there a website? Films? Research reports or evaluations? Other forms of documentation? (please supply references or links)

Web link to Connected Classrooms video: http://vimeo.com/15721115