What Happens When Fourth and Fifth Graders

Participate in an Online Conference?

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Statement of Intent/Need

My curiosity about online conferencing began in the fall of 2000 when I heard Scott Christian, an instructor at the University of Alaska Southeast, give a presentation on an online conference that he experienced and wrote about in his book, *Exchanging Lives*. While a teacher in Nikiski, Alaska, Mr. Christian coordinated an online conference between eighth grade classrooms in Alaska, Mississippi, and Vermont. The purpose of the conference was to exchange ideas about the book, *The Diary of Ann Frank*. What Mr. Christian discovered is that writing to an audience of one's peers, rather than to one's teacher, makes an incredible difference in the amount of voice that comes through in their writing, as well as in the depth of content that they convey. My first thought was to wonder if this would be the same for younger students. With the audience of one's peers, and with the thrill of being online, perhaps a student would not only express more voice in his/her writing, but also feel like he/she has a greater voice in this world. Curious, I began to review the literature on online conferencing.

In creating an online conference for Alaskan students, my purpose was to provide students with the opportunity to connect with peers from every region of the state, and to have a voice – to share ideas and information with each other. In designing and conducting my research study, I wondered if participation in an online conference would foster skills in communication, awareness of other points of view, and feelings of citizenship.

People, being social creatures, need to communicate with each other. We communicate with language that can be read, written, spoken, and heard. In schools, we teach Language Arts – the art of language. We want students to know how to

communicate to others effectively – both in writing and speaking. We want students to comprehend – both in reading and listening – what others are communicating to them. In the world today, communication is becoming more and more electronic. Considering the exponential growth of technology each year, it is likely that communication in twenty years, when the children of today are adults, will seem like science fiction to us now. If we are to provide students with the skills necessary for them to succeed as adults, we need to recognize that the definition of literacy is changing. No longer is it simply the ability to read and write the printed word. It is also the ability to read and write the electronic word. In this digital age, information and ideas are exchanged and shared around the globe within seconds. It is important for schools to provide students with the technology that is available in the world today, not that was available ten years ago. The attitudes that students form in regards to technology should not be based on technology from the past, but on what is available in the present, whether it is available in their individual homes or not. Communication is the artwork created by the media of language, and it should include the capabilities of the present, and the potential of the future, and not just the methods of the past.

We live in a world rich with diversity. Different languages are spoken. Different customs and traditions. Different types of families. Different climates and geographies. Different points of view. We want students to appreciate the similarities and differences among people, and to recognize that there is more than one way of looking at things. We want students to celebrate who they are as individuals, with their own unique strengths and family folklore, and to enjoy working cooperatively with others who are equally special in different ways. As social creatures, we learn and work and solve problems

together. We don't want our students to think of life as "every man for himself." We want students to value and respect each other, and to find the diversity of ideas, perspectives, and abilities to be beneficial for problem-solving, for collaboration, for productivity, and for the enrichment of our lives.

As the population of this world grows exponentially, an individual person can begin to feel as insignificant as a grain of sand on a beach, or a drop of water in the ocean. "I am just one person. I can't make a difference. It doesn't matter what I think. No one will hear me. I am a nobody." If our students think those thoughts, then what will the future of this world be? The students of today are the leaders of our future. We want students to feel that their voice matters, that they can make a difference in this world. This world depends on people to strive for peace, and to protect its environment. People need to care, and to work together, in order for the world to survive. We want students to think of themselves as citizens of this world who therefore have a responsibility to care about it, and to use their voices to make a difference.

Does participation in an online conference help fourth and fifth graders to communicate, to hear other points of view, and to feel a sense of citizenship in this world?

Rationale/Review of Research

An online conference is not a chat room, nor is it e-mail. It is a secured website for which the participant must be registered with a password. The participants do not need to be on the computer at the same time as each other. They may enter the conference from any computer in the world that is connected to the Internet. Upon

entering, they select a discussion, read what others have written in it, and write their own

message. When setting up an online conference, the host has several options of how the

conference will be regulated and who will have access to it. I chose, for example, the

option of moderating (approving or disapproving) what the participants post into the

discussion, and the option of allowing read-only access to unregistered viewers.

Before beginning the online conference, I reviewed the educational research that

has been done on it. Common themes that I found in the research were that online

conferencing prepares students for success in this ever-changing world, provides a

multicultural and potentially global classroom, and reflects a constructivist view of

learning.

A New World, A Digital World

First, this world is becoming more and more digital as advances in technology

accelerate each year. It is more than just a cliché to say how important it is for us to

teach to our students' future rather than to our past. McKeon states that "we are

experiencing a historic change in the nature of literacy and learning as digital, multimedia

resources enter our world," and that "emerging forms of electronic reading and writing

require a paradigm shift in traditional conceptions of literacy" (McKeon, 1999). In the

words of El-Hindi, "literacy now involves being able to make sense of and navigate

through several forms of information including images, sounds, animation, and ongoing

discussion groups (El-Hindi, 1998). Notice the number of active verbs that El-Hindi

associates with the newly evolving definition of literacy:

> *"The idea of an isolated text no longer makes sense as children today are exposed*
> *to more fluid forms of information transfer. Being literate involves **integrating***

> *reading and writing, **navigating** through information sources, **discriminating** between important and unimportant information, **responding** to e-mail, or **engaging** in electronic chat sessions. In short, it means being able to **communicate** in…a "post-typographic" world" (El-Hindi, 1998).*

Kinzer and Leu agree that literacy is being redefined. In their words, "literacy and learning are being redefined by the digital communication and multimedia technologies that are quickly becoming a part of the information age in which we live…and our response to these important changes will determine our students' ability to succeed in the world that awaits them" (Kinzer and Leu, 1997). In regards to this "emerging world of digital communication," McKeon seconds the importance of "equipping our children with the skills they will need to use technology productively and confidently in an ever-changing advanced technological world" (McKeon, 1999). D'Ignazio challenges us by saying, "if the technology in the classroom cannot keep up with what the kids already know, are we setting ourselves up for a generation of dropouts who leave because we cannot offer them enough of an educational challenge?" (D'Ignazio, 1991). In other words, as the world changes, educators need to change with it so that children will learn how to succeed in the world as it is in the present and future, rather than how it was in the past. In this "age of information," our environment is becoming more and more electronic and digital. Literacy and learning is connected to our environment, and affected by our prior experiences (Kinzer and Leu, 1997; McKeon, 1999; El-Hindi, 1998).

A Global Classroom

Second, online conferencing provides a multicultural and potentially global classroom. "As the world becomes increasingly a global village, so the opportunities for

students to communicate should reach beyond the four walls of the classroom" (Mulligan and Gore, 1992). What is a global village? A village is what one commonly thinks of as one's community. One's community is the people with whom one is able to interact, collaborate, play, work, and share life. When one is able to do all of that, in real time, with people around the world, one's community, or village, or classroom, becomes global. Mulligan and Gore emphasize the cultural benefits of global classrooms. With telecommunications, students are able to communicate with classrooms all over the world, and thus the four walls of a classroom fall away. Students begin to see what they have in common with each other, no matter what their traditions, culture, language, race, or socioeconomic status, and they find differences to be interesting rather than offensive. In other words, "telecommunications bridges the different cultural, social, and economic worlds and does in fact make the world smaller and more comprehensible" (Mulligan and Gore, 1992). In addition, students realize that they have a voice in this world, and can make a difference. Students become more aware of global issues, and think about their own opinions regarding those issues (Mulligan and Gore, 1992).

Noden and Moss elaborate on the theme of a global classroom, which they call a "virtual school." They explain that technology creates "virtual schools," or schools that communicate electronically with the world (Noden and Moss, 1993). With electronic communication, there are "no walls, no halls, no janitors, and no security guards…[and it is] open to anyone without regard to age, sex, race, or handicap" (Noden and Moss, 1993). Noden and Moss add that, in a "virtual school," "learning has none of the traditional limitations of classroom periods, classroom space, and classroom companions. Students can study at all times of the day or night in any location with other students

thousands of miles away" (Noden and Moss, 1993). In other words, a "virtual school" is "limited only by the imagination of the learner and his/her teacher" (Noden and Moss, 1993). Noden and Moss summarize well the multicultural and motivational benefits of a virtual, global, and digital classroom:

> *"The virtual school combines students' fascination with computers with an authentic motivation to read and write. Reading, writing, learning, and computing become integrated. Generating the kind of student enthusiasm usually reserved for Nintendo games, global interaction in the virtual school arouses curiosity, bonds cultures, and invites new directions for education and, perhaps, for civilization as a whole"* (Noden and Moss, 1993).

A Constructivist View of Learning

Not only does an online conference lower the walls of a classroom and extend them to a global potential, where each voice may be heard around the world, but it allows the students to be active participants in their own learning. As the third theme, the constructivist view of learning maintains that students should be actively involved in constructing their own meaning, rather than passively observing and absorbing what others do and say. By taking what they know, and using that knowledge to interpret and make sense of what is new, they construct meaning. This view believes that if experiences in the classroom have applications to real life, they will be more personally meaningful to the students, and more actively learned. D'Ignazio acknowledges that "today's teachers are facing the challenge of making their lessons more socially interactive, interdisciplinary, and embedded in real-world knowledge, topics, and themes" (D'Ignazio, 1991). Research shows that online conferencing, and other uses of the Internet, reflect a constructivist view of learning (Kinzer and Leu, 1997; Mulligan and Gore, 1992; Noden and Moss, 1993; D'Ignazio, 1991; Moore, 1991; El-Hindi, 1998;

Bateman and Benson, 1999; McKeon, 1999).   Consider the well-written findings of El-Hindi:

> *"Effective use of the Internet can help teachers move toward facilitating constructivist learning environments. On the Internet, students can **explore** a nearly infinite variety of topics, **engage** in inquiry, and **create** original work using the full spectrum of multimedia technology…Organizing instruction around big ideas, empowering students, and creating classroom environments that promote learning through social interaction are key components that can be supported by effective use of the Internet"* (D'Ignazio, 1991).

As El-Hindi points out, "constructivism assumes that learning occurs as students generate questions and seek out answers," and therefore "constructivist teachers foster student inquiry and value the students' point of view." In other words, "students direct their own learning with the necessary scaffolding provided by the teacher" (El-Hindi, 1991). In sum, the Internet allows for students to be actively involved in their learning. Consider the active verbs that El-Hindi uses to describe what children experience on the Internet: navigate, discover, create, collaborate, initiate, question, generate, respond, discriminate, engage, devise, explore, and construct.

In addition to the active participation and initiative of the students, social interaction and collaboration are integral parts of the constructivist view of learning. Online conferencing also allows for this as it links classrooms around the world so that students from one classroom may collaborate with students in another classroom.   An online conference is a conversation in which the spoken words are replaced with written words. The purpose of writing is to communicate, and communication is social – it connects people. Computer conferencing makes sense because it allows for writing to an active audience that can engage in true interactive communication (Batemen and Benson, 1999). An advantage to a written conversation is that writing "slows down the thought

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process and gives students greater opportunities to consider the complexity of ideas.

Students find themselves more carefully crafting their views, even though there may not

be a 'right' answer" (Bateman and Benson, 1999). Thus, the "collaborative nature of

online conferencing often leads to greater and more elaborate insights" (Bateman and

Benson, 1999).

Not only does online communication between classrooms allow for reading and

writing to be authentic and social, but it allows for an audience of one's peers. Mulligan

and Gore find that "students enjoy communicating and learning more when they are able

to write to a distant audience of their peers" (Mulligan and Gore, 1992). They also note

that "children communicating with children" is what both research and common sense

tell us "enhances students' verbal skills: writing to real audiences for real purposes"

(Mulligan and Gore, 1992). Consider the findings of Bateman and Benson:

> *"Having peers as a primary audience certainly was a factor in the students'*
> *willingness to talk about themselves. From the start the voices began to*
> *converge, some serious, some meditative, others playful, as they crisscross the*
> *state from classroom to classroom. You can sense the enjoyment the students took*
> *in introducing themselves. In the online conference the students did not look to*
> *their teacher to discover what they should write." (Bateman and Benson, 1999).*

If writing is only for the purpose of demonstrating knowledge, then it is not allowing for

new knowledge to be "socially constructed" as it is when writing to an active audience.

With an interactive audience, the "emphasis is on making meaning for others" (Bateman

and Benson, 1999).

Moore also found online conferencing to support a constructivist view of

learning. She found that, when participating in an online conference, her fifth graders

"took control of their own learning" by asking questions and making comparisons online,

by becoming "more confident and motivated to read and write," by relating events to

their own lives, and by being "willing to take risks and experiment with language" (Moore, 1991). Moore also found that "as students began to realize that someone valued what they said, their motivation and interest in sharing their ideas in clear, explicit ways increased " (Moore, 1991). Moore noted that "using computers seemed to enhance student motivation and attention span. The informal, conversational style of electronic dialogues provided a motivating medium that enabled students to focus upon their own thoughts and explore how they might be expressed more clearly" (Moore, 1991). For these findings, she credits the "telecommunications project that provided an opportunity for students to participate in meaningful, purposeful literacy activities with a real audience" and that demonstrated the "power of electronic dialogues in literacy learning" (Moore, 1991). Thus, having social interaction with an authentic audience, as well as having an authentic purpose, are aspects of an online conference. El-Hindi points out that social interaction and being an active participant in one's learning are two key parts of the constructivist view of being a learner, and the Internet allows for both (El-Hindi, 1998).

In a classroom that uses multimedia and electronic communication to fuel its voyage of discovery, or its inquiry learning, D'Ignazio notes five benefits that, I believe, tie together the three themes I found in my research: 1) Students are actively a part of their learning; 2) Students are experiencing cooperative and collaborative group activities; 3) Students are learning communication and organization skills; 4) Students are able to use their own learning style and experience others; and 5) Students are keeping up with the digital advancements in this age of information (D'Ignazio, 1991). In this classroom, "the teacher's job is to tap the complex cluster of visual, auditory, and three-

dimensional literacies that students have developed as a result of hundreds of hours of exposure to electronic media, and to turn student multimedia consumers and readers into writers, authors, and composers" (D'Ignazio, 1991). Taking the analogy of a composer and continuing the music theme, I will summarize my review of literature with the eloquence of Bateman and Benson:

> *At their best, traditional classroom forums are like a prescribed, yet static, symphony; students play the same part in class after class. They know what to expect from each other, and they often have their teachers figured out and know how to succeed. Good teachers can and do make such a traditional class harmonize well, encouraging each student to play his or her part to the best of his/her ability. But the online classroom is more like a jazz ensemble than a carefully charted symphonic affair, and it encourages the harmony and occasional discord necessary to professional discourse. There is the element of spontaneity. Students don't look to the teacher to figure out the charts for them. They look to each other and build an exciting, often fast-paced, creation of their own" (Bateman and Benson, 1999).*

In other words, prepare to let the students take off and fly!

Procedures and Process

Setting up an online conference requires the participation of classrooms, and having a purpose. Before contacting classroom teachers, I considered my purpose for the conference. An online conference can be used for different purposes, and mine was not for promoting or evaluating skills in writing. In fact, looking at the quality of writing actually conflicted with my purpose. For me, the purpose of the online conference was simply to provide students with the opportunity to communicate, to hear different points of view from their peers around the state, and to hopefully realize that they can have a voice in this world – that their own voice can make a difference. Therefore, I didn't require my students' writing to be edited. My concern about editing, particularly when

done by a teacher, was that it might make the students feel more self-conscious or insecure about their writing, less motivated to write, and less ownership of their writing. Bateman and Benson share this concern:

> *"When speculative student writing is acknowledged with criticism of style and grammar, and worse yet, belittlement of the student's attempt at inquiry, student thinking shifts into neutral, and the ideas generated by writing, though they may adhere to rules of grammary and style, will not be very thoughtful or interesting" (Bateman and Benson, 1999).*

If my purpose for the conference had been to promote or evaluate writing skills, then it would make a difference whether or not the writing was edited and by whom. Since it was not my purpose, I preferred that the participating teachers not edit their students' writing.

After determining my purpose for the online conference, I came up with a open-ended plan for the structure of the conference. For the most part, I wanted it to be student-directed so that the students would feel a sense of ownership in their conference. However, I knew it would be helpful for fourth and fifth graders to have some structure. Because the fourth grade curriculum focuses on studying the different regions of Alaska, I decided that it would be fun to have at least one classroom from each region of the state represented in the conference, and to have students discuss the past, present, and future of the state. My idea was to have one topic per week, and I planned topics for the first five weeks that progressed from being mostly literal to mostly abstract. I expected the first week to be one of introductions and what they like best about where they live. The next week would be about a typical "day in the life" of the students in both the winter and the summer. The third week would move to the past. What was their village like when their grandparents were kids? Students could interview their grandparents, or someone that

age, and ask questions about what the village was like back in the past. They could then report their findings in the conference. The fourth week would move to the future. What do the students think their village will be like in 20 years, or in 100 years? And, what do they *wish* it would be like? The fifth week would move to the concept of citizenship. What do you think you can do, either now or as an adult, to make a difference in your community? Before contacting any teachers, my initial outline of a plan was as follows:

Week One: Introductions
Week Two: Day in the Life
Week Three: Village in the Past
Week Four: Village in the Future
Week Five: Making a Difference…

Even with this plan, I knew that the online conference may take off in another direction. I really didn't know what to expect, and that made it all the more fun. With a minimal structure, I wanted to see where the kids took this.

Once I knew my purpose, and had a five-week plan, I began searching for teachers. To find the e-mail addresses of teachers, I started with the web site for the State of Alaska Department of Education. From there, I was able to link to the web sites for each school district in the state. From the school district sites, I linked to individual school web sites. If the school web site provided e-mail addresses for teachers in grades 4-8, I sent an e-mail. If I couldn't find an e-mail address for a teacher, I looked for an e-mail address for a school principal, a superintendent, or even a webmaster. For the latter, I sent an e-mail with a request that it be forwarded to any intermediate teachers in that school. I had a letter of introduction, and I e-mailed it to almost one hundred e-mail addresses found in the school web sites of Alaska. I received a positive response from about two classrooms, but otherwise I received almost no response. I realized that

teachers receive so much e-mail that, if they don't know the sender, they most likely don't open it. What I needed was for teachers to open the e-mail I was sending. My next strategy was to visit the web sites for schools within the state, and search for a school phone number. I phoned the school and asked to speak with the principal. I briefly explained the conference to the principal, and asked if I could e-mail a letter of explanation to him or her. I asked the principals to forward the e-mail to their teachers, knowing that teachers will open an e-mail that is sent from their principal. This proved much more successful. I began this process in early January, and it took about two weeks. By the last part of January, I had attained my goal of recruiting at least one classroom from each region of the state: From the Far North, Point Hope joined the conference. From the Interior, Healy joined. Bettles and North Pole would join later. From the South Central region, Wasilla joined. From the Western region, Naknek, Diomede, Wales, and Nome joined. And from the Southeast region of Alaska, Sitka, Ketchikan, and Juneau were participating. From these twelve classrooms, the total number of students was near 200.

For the last week of January, I began the conference for the teachers only. This gave the teachers an opportunity to get used to the conference. It also gave me a chance to work out any bugs that appeared. I realized that having a "teacher's discussion" on the conference would be a great way for the teachers to collaborate throughout the conference. The teacher's conference was hidden from the students, and thus private. Each teacher gave me a class list, and I registered each student with their first name and the town they were from, along with a password. If for example, there was a student named Amy in the class from Wasilla, her name would be "Amy in Wasilla," and her

password would be "wasilla." To keep passwords simple, everyone in the same class had

the same password, and it was the name of their village. On the Internet, the students

would navigate to the secured website of the online conference, and then enter their name

and password. After logging on, they would enter the Online Conference for Alaskan

Students. Once in the conference, they would navigate to a discussion. In a discussion,

they could read what other students had written, and they could write their own message.

As the host of this conference, I chose to also moderate it. This meant that the messages

posted by students would not appear in the discussion until I had seen and approved

them. From my point of view, this was just a precaution against bad language. In the 3

½ months of the conference, I never once saw any inappropriate language used.

The conference took on a life of its own in only the first week. Within four days,

121 messages came in. I realized that I would have to make some adjustments to

accommodate such a large conference. I also realized that the students needed more than

one week to introduce themselves and share personal information about their lives with

each other. They were asking each other questions, and they needed the freedom,

without deadlines, to respond. I decided to break the conference into three categories.

The first category would be the *Introductions and Sharing* area. It would be

completely student-directed. I would set up a new discussion in that area each week, in

chronological order. The only reason for this is that the conferencing system was only

able to allow 150 messages per discussion. The Introductions and Sharing area stayed

open throughout the entire length of the conference. Students could visit it at any time to

share whatever they wanted with each other, and ask each other questions.

The second category was my "*Weekly Topics*" area. This is where I put the weekly topics about the past, present, and future of Alaska. As the conference continued, new topics were added:

WEEK SIX: SPECIAL: The Iditarod 2001
WEEK SEVEN: Environmental Concerns
WEEK TEN: STUDENTS' CHOICE: Sports

The discussion on Environmental Concerns was so successful that I actually let the focus stay on that one for a few weeks. Even though the topics were listed for a certain week, students were free to enter and add to any of the previous discussions at any time.

The third category was called "*Ongoing Topics*." This is the area where I set up discussions that I thought the students would find either useful or fun, based on what I found them writing in the Introductions and Sharing area. For example, many of the students had been writing about Harry Potter, so I wondered what would happen if I set up a discussion just on Harry Potter. I created a set of Book Discussions. One was for Harry Potter; another was for Favorite Books; and two others were for Gary Paulsen books that my students were reading in class. Just for fun, and being curious, I set up a discussion for Favorite Recipes.

The last set of discussions that I set up, in this area of ongoing topics, was on the geography and culture of the different Alaska regions. I knew that all the fourth graders in the conference were studying the different regions of Alaska as part of their curriculum. I knew that my students were responsible for finding out information about the habitats, animals, landforms, natural resources, transportation, history, customs, languages, and people of a certain region of Alaska. I had told them that, when doing research, they can use any information that doesn't come from their own head. In other

words, they could use information from books, encyclopedias, educational and informational web sites, and from people who lived there. I explained that they, living in Juneau, are experts on Juneau. And anyone who lives in Point Hope can be considered an expert on Point Hope. If they ask someone in Point Hope what types of habitats they have there, they can use in their report any information that is given to them by that person. That person would be considered an "expert source." Although this began as one discussion, the students in Sitka soon recommended that we break this discussion into five – one for each region. This helped organize it so that the students would have an easier time finding information. The discussion on the Far North region is where students could post questions about the Far North, and the Far North students could provide answers. My students could post questions in any regional discussion, and check them for answers, but they also had to monitor the Southeast discussion so they could provide any answers about Juneau that were asked by other students in the state.

There were also two other areas in the conference that the students didn't see. One was the Teachers' Discussion. The other was a Feedback area. For each village, I set up a generic name that said: "Opinion from Wasilla," or "Opinion from Naknek," etc. If a student logged onto the conference as "Opinion from…", they would find a discussion that said "What do I think about this Online Conference?" This was their opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings, and/or suggestions about the conference. It was completely anonymous, and I was the only one who saw the messages in this discussion.

Once this structure was in place, I didn't change it. All I did was categorize the discussions, and then the students did the rest. The only aberration I made was to give

my students the option of writing their homework assignment for our reading group. Once a week the students were given an abstract question, in regards to *Dogsong*, on which they were to write a paragraph. They could either write it by hand, or they could write it in the *Dogsong* discussion of the online conference. The questions were posted in that discussion. Other students in the conference were invited to join in this discussion if they desired.

Every three to four weeks I asked my students for feedback. I did this in two ways. First, I wrote two questions on the board and they took 5-10 minutes to write out some fast-write answers. The questions were often as simple as: What do you like or dislike about the online conference, and why? What do you find most or least useful about the online conference, and why? Do you have any suggestions for the online conference? Afterward, we would convene in the meeting area and I would put the same questions out to them for discussion. What I found was that what one person said would make someone else think of something, that would make someone else think of something, etc. While they talked, I took notes. This took only about 5 minutes. These 15 minutes were useful to me for finding out what the students thought. I would often tell them, "*Other teachers would like to know if it is worth using school time for an online conference. They don't really care about what I think. They care what you think. So give this some thought and let me know what you really think. I will share your opinions with other teachers who are curious*." I also asked the participating teachers for their feedback, and that of their students. A few teachers shared some anecdotes with me of experiences that their students had with the online conference. Lastly, I kept notes of a few anecdotes that occurred with my own students during the conference.

Analysis/Insight

Communication

In planning the conference, I hadn't realized what a skill it is to write to a large audience. The students needed some direction instruction and modeling in this. An example I gave was this:

> *If Joe in Naknek wrote about having a dog, and Hanna in North Pole wrote about liking to shop, I might write in my message: "I read that Joe in Naknek likes dogs. I do too. I want to go on a dogsled someday. Has anyone ever gone dogsledding? I also read that Hanna in North Pole likes to go shopping. I love shopping. I wish there was a big mall here in Juneau. Does anyone else like to go shopping?"*

The formula I modeled was: 1) Refer to what someone said. 2) Comment on it. 3) Open it up to everyone else by asking a question about it. I never expected that every student would start using that exact model, and then that students in other villages would also! I think perhaps it was a combination of the students being more literal at this age, and needing that formula to help them with writing to an unfamiliar type of audience. In a way, that formula was like scaffolding for them. Note these messages:

> *From C. in Juneau:*
> *I read that two people in Healy like to play Hockey in the winter. It is nice to know someone likes to play Hockey around Alaska. Is there any more peaople that like to play Hockey?*
> > *Your Southeast friend, C. in Juneau*

> *From D. in Naknek:*
> *I read that M. in Point Hope just moved there. I've never been there but I think any place in Alaska you feel like you are wild and free. Dose anyone else feel that way?*

Soon, however, the students were taking the formula and personalizing it, and then they didn't need it anymore.

Not only did I find that the students needed some guidance on how to respond to individual messages while writing to a large audience, I also found that they needed some instruction on what a written conversation entails. To do this, I had two students stand up in front of the class. While they stood there, I said:

Let's pretend that Laura and Suzie are having a conversation. Laura here says to Suzie, "I was up all night long. I am so exhausted today." Would Suzie then say to Laura, "I'm having pizza for lunch today!"???

Everyone agreed that Suzie wouldn't say that. "Why not?" I asked. "Because it would be changing the subject," was the reply. Exactly. I explained that the online conference is just like having a conversation, but we're writing what we say instead of speaking it. I said that if someone writes something in the conference, and instead of reading it and responding, we just write something totally different, then we are changing the subject. Most of these mini-lessons were spur-of-the-moment when I noticed a pattern in the students' behavior that I realized was a communication skill that required some modeling or instruction. It hadn't occurred to me that the students, upon entering the conference, would skip all of the messages and zoom to the end where they could write their own. They were more interested in writing about their own experiences and thoughts than they were in reading what other students had written. Again, I think the reason for that is a combination of their age level being so egocentric, and not having had previous experience with this type of online interactive discussion. In a way, I provided another formula, or structure, by asking them to: 1) Read through all the messages with a notebook and take notes on at least three messages that they want to comment on. 2) Write a message, that is not to a specific person, that comments (or poses a question) on at least 3 specific things that they read in the conference. These directions helped the

students learn what to do in the conference. It took a few weeks for the students to get used to entering, navigating, reading, and writing in the online conference. Once they did, I began to notice some great examples of communication. In each of the examples below, the students are responding to each other.

Example 1

From A. in Juneau:
In Point Hope: Is there a lot of whales there? How do you hunt whales and what kind of whale do you like to hunt? How do you like to save animals? What is Point Hope like?

From J. in Point Hope:
In Fall time the men go out in the ice and catch a seal and bring it back to the town and give it to the ladys and the sew the skin togaher anad the men put the skin on the boat and the men gat ready for boating. It is fun. We get to see a whale in real life. The men go out and go hunting for the whale. There are between 3 and 8 men in each skin boat. The skin is bleached seal skin. The elderly women (akaa) bleach the skins and the men and boys build the boats. One man in the back stears the boat. One man harpoons the whale while the others paddle. They use a bomb on the harpoon. When a whale is caught they use a block and tackle system to pull the whale up on the ice. The whole village pulls.

From M. in Point Hope:
Hi, my name is M. I'm from Anchorage AK. I moved to Pt. Hope with my family to ixperince something way different from the city. We defenitly got what we wanted. Pt. Hope is amazing comparing it against Anchorage. There are all new things here, I have never heard of. If anybody out there has just moved to one of these villages, please tell me what you thought when you moved there. These are some of the things I have heard that I would never have known Hunting whales, Blanket toss, eskimo dancing, baleen baskets, ivory and whale bone carving, and lots of festivals. I LOVE animals and love to save them and I think that's whats secial about me. I'am not very good at sports, but I'am very fond of soccer. I have 1 dog, 1 cat and 1 fish my favorite color is Blue.

From J. in Diomede:
I am J. I am 10 years old. I live at Little Diomede, Ak. I was on a plane that chrshed when I was 3 days old. One thing I hate about Diomede is when there is lightening. I love Eskimo dancing and boating. My first time going to Wales, Ak was when I wa 4 years old. My favorite game is snowball fighting. We used to pay it until it is time for curfew. We go murre egging by the cliffs for some eggs in the summer. I like to eat murre eggs for breadfast. Diomede looks like a big

rock. It does not have trees and that is cool. sometimes we get light blue ice.
Sincerely, J.

Example 2 (Introductions and Sharing discussion):

From L. in Wasilla
On Saturday I read a book called Redwall. I don't go outside its too cold. It can
be –5 degrees outside. Today I woke up at 3:00 in the morning while thising to
the radio. My dad is leaving in 9months. He doesn't no were he's going. Were
you live do you have malls?

From E. in Naknek
…The think I like best about living in BB am that unlike Anchorage, I can go
around town and not worry about some creep kidnapping me. The thing I like
least is there are no malls.

From K. in Juneau
Does it stink to have no malls? I would die without malls. Do you have good
stores there at least? Is there any other town that don't have malls or is it just
Naknek?

Example 3 (Introductions and Sharing discussion):

From C. in North Pole
Hi, my name is C. I am 11 years old. I am in the 5 grade. In North Pole we have
a Santa Clause House and there are real reindeer that we can see. At Pizza Hut
Santa delivers Pizza. Have you ever seen Santa do that? It doesn't rain a lot but
it snows. This winter we hardly got any. I sometimes wish I was in Hawaii.

From T. in Naknek
I read that C. in North Pole has a Santa delivers her pizza and she gets to see
reindeer. Does anyone else get to see reindeer?

From L. in Wales
In July we have corral sometimes in June kids my age wrestle fawns or grab
horns. Corral is where we wrestle reindeer. They come right when it is corral
time. I grab horns I wrestle fawns with my friend K. from Wales she is my first
cousin and my best friend or I wrestle with my cousin C.

Example 4 (Harry Potter discussion):

From L. in Healy: Harry Potter Rules
I'm on the second book. I'm reading were they get the book out of the restricted
area. They just found the Pollyjuice potion. And they are in Moaning Myrtules
bathroom. My favorite part in the first book about the dragon. And my favorite
part in the second book is the part were nearly headless nick distracks Snape.

From S. in Juneau
I thought that Harry Potter is a good book. My fav character is Professor Flich. The reason I like him is beacuse he is strict and serious. My other fav. Character is Snape Because his is snoopy (in the first book when someone let the troll in).

From B. in Juneau
I like Lord Voldormoot because he's evil and he's trying to hurt Harry. And I don't like Harry because he's always so chicken. He doesn't get in any action.

From F. in North Pole:
Excuse me Bryce I think voldermort is cool to but you should read book 4 it's better than them all and Harry does get lot of action.

Example 5 (Environmental Concerns discussion):

From K. in North Pole:
We have a concern about guns in our schools. Some people have threatened to bring guns and shoot them in the schools around here.
The dumsters we have are getting to full and over flowing with the trash we haave that we fill up every year.

H. in Juneau:
A concern in Juneau is that we have garbage bears and they get into the garbage. The garbage can kill the bears and people don't want to kill the bears and make them suffer. People don't want the bears dieing of eating the garbage.
Do people really bring guns to school in the North Pole? That's not good. That is very dangerous. Has any body ever got engered?

From J. in North Pole:
What my concerns are is that when the bears get shot and they keep getting shot they keep getting died off (extioncit). And the more they get extioncit we will have no more. And when we have no more then what will we have? beside's Polar Bears?

From S. in Bettles:
If you want help with the garbage bears you should get a good strong Bungee cord and put it over the trash can. That way the bears can't open it.

Example 6 (Environmental Concerns discussion):

From K. in Juneau
I read that K. in Bettles is worried because the people are killing the moose and the population of moose is dying. I think that it is ok to kill the moose for food but if they just kill the moose for fun and waste the meat it is not ok. I also read that

N. in North Pole is worried because of poachers. They are killing the animals and not eating the meat and this bad. So agree with her.

From L. in Wasilla:
people are killing all the animals. Soon there won't be any to anoy me. So if you are killing animals you a very evil, bad, crazy scopaths. SO DON'T KILL ANIMALS, PEOPLE!!!!!!!

One of the aspects of communication that I most appreciated in this online conference is that it worked well for all ability levels. All four of my students with special needs (Learning Disabled, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, ADHD) absolutely LOVED being a part of the conference. Even two weeks after it ended, one of these students came up and told me how much she loved being in the online conference, and asked if we could do it again. During the sixth week of the conference, I noticed that the one boy who is the most disabled was always very focused and intent while in the conference. Though ADHD, focusing on the computer seemed to help him. His attention never wavered. His learning disability makes it very difficult for him to write anything that is legible, but he didn't ask for any help. He also didn't want a teacher to see and edit what he wrote before he posted it. He would spend 45 minutes or more painstakingly typing out a few sentences, and then post it. His pride was obvious. This was a boy who has a lot to say, and he thoroughly loved the opportunity to communicate his ideas about things. I enjoyed watching him in the conference. It was good for him.

I heard from the teacher in Point Hope that two of her students with special needs, who weren't registered in the conference, and who hadn't shown any motivation in school thus far, had heard the other students talking about the conference and wanted to join. They asked her if they could write in the conference. I registered them. They came in after school to write in the conference, and they loved it. Having the opportunity to

write online to peers around the state, and to communicate their ideas, experiences, and knowledge about life in Point Hope, made them feel good about themselves. They experienced a sense of motivation! It was not just the students with lower abilities that loved being in the conference. My students with higher abilities did also.

My student with the greatest cognitive abilities would not write by hand. However, when I gave him the option of writing his homework in a book discussion of the online conference, he did it every time. What I hadn't realized is that he needed a different vehicle for communication. His mother believes that he thinks faster than he can write by hand, and so he gets frustrated and doesn't write. However, he types faster than he writes by hand, and so she believes he has an easier time putting down his thoughts. In addition, he is ADHD and very kinesthetic. Again, the computer screen seems to help him keep his focus, and the fast movement of his fingers are more comfortable for his style of learning. Communication wasn't just easier for students of different ability levels, but also for students who are very quiet. I think some of the quietest students in class had some of the loudest voices on the conference. One of my most quiet and intense students said to me:

> I think it's cool that we get to communicate with other kids that we don't know. I think other kids in the state like it because they write to people personally or to the whole state and they sound like they're excited and they really like to tell about themselves and what people ask them.

The reflections of my other students also confirmed for me how much they enjoyed being able to communicate information and ideas in the online conference:

> I like the online conference because you can talk to pepole in place you do not nowhere they are.

> The thing I like best about the online conference is that you get a chance to comunicate and have a discussion with other people in the state. I liked the

enviermental issues best because kids can talk to other kids about there city and what is a envirmental concern and may be help. I think this online conference is useful for kids in school because they get a chance to talk and communicate by computer and talk to kids that are most of the same age as them.

I like the online conference because it alowse us to use the web to easly comunicate with other cultures. The discution I like best was the enviormental isues it's important to know concernce. I think the most use full thing is we (the students) can now easly communicate to get info about the people who do the stuff from the people who do it.

I like that you can talk to diffrent people across Alaska and talk about the issues.

I think the conference is use ful because it is fun an educational at the same time it is educational because the other kids give you information.

I hadn't planned it, but the online conference seemed to provide students of different abilities and learning styles with a vehicle and motivation for communication that they hadn't had previously. The motivation remained as long as the students felt free to write without fear of reprisals for any errors.

I also expected motivation to only remain as long as the server capabilities were dependable. Although it was definitely disappointing when a technical difficulty prevented a student from entering the conference, or caused a message to be lost, the students took it in stride when the server went down, or the network had an error, or another technical difficulty presented itself. No one in my class ever got angry about technical difficulties. I talked about what it means to "trouble-shoot," and how we were charting new directions and unexplored territories. The Star Trek theme was common with this class, as they've named the classroom computers, *Enterprise, Voyager, Borg*, and *Make It So #1*. The students wanted to be pioneers in this new experience, and so they took the challenges in stride. I believe it helped how I, as the teacher, responded to the difficulties, and how I presented them to the class. Overall, the online conference

allowed for writing to become a media of true communication for all of my students – no exceptions.

Points of View and Multicultural Experiences

One of my favorite aspects of the Online Conference for Alaskan Students was the variety of points of view and cultures represented. Participating in this conference were classrooms from many different native villages. Students living in a native village may have spent their entire lives communicating only with people of their same culture. They might also only know one way of living. In so many parts of Alaska, people survive by subsistence living. In other words, they live by hunting, gathering, and fishing. The conference provided the opportunity for them to learn about other ways of living, other types of environmental concerns, and other points of view. It also allowed them to have a voice of their own…a chance to share with others what their life is like, what knowledge they have, and what their ideas and dreams are. In the students' words, they express their desire to know about the lives and opinions of others:

> *I like that you can learn about other stuff around the world. I think it is useful being in the conference because you can get to learn about other people and learn about things around the world.*
>
> *I like the online conferance because its nice to read other peoples opinion about the state.*
>
> *I like being in the conference because you get to know about other kids and thier culture.*
>
> *I think it is good because you can find a lot of intresting information and you can find peoples life and about them.*

The classrooms came from villages of Yupik Eskimos in the Western region, Inupiaq Eskimos in the Far North, Athabaskan Indians in the Interior, and Tlingits in the

Southeast. In addition, there were many students who are white or from other parts of the world and now living in Alaska. There were students who had never known anything different than one culture and one way of living, and students who had seen many different cultures and ways of living all over the world. Even with all of the differences, there could be found similarities between all of the students. It was a wonderful opportunity for these students to connect with each other as Alaskans, discuss topics ranging from environmental concerns to favorite books and sports, and be exposed to different points of view.

The two discussions that stand out to me the most, in regards to points of view, are the discussion on "Village in the Future," and the discussion on "Environmental Concerns." In regards to looking at the future, I found it fascinating that while the students in Juneau were thinking of floating bridges to Hawaii and hovercrafts, students in Wales and Diomede were thinking of having houses with plumbing, and not having to use honey pots anymore.

> *From K. in Juneau:*
> *In 20 years is think that Juneau won't be much different except for more high tech stuff and bigger malls. Thats what I think will happen in Juneau. What I wish will happen to Juneau in 20 yars is Juneau will have the biggest mall in the world. I also think that the Lock Ness monster will be found and more of them will come. I also wish there will be a floating bridge to Hawaii.*

> *From C. in Wales:*
> *I think that Wales will be different in twenty years. There might be running water in everybody's home. Maybe people won't need to use honeybuckets anymore.*

In regards to environmental concerns, geography came into play. Students in the Interior were concerned about pollution in the slough, and students in the Southeast had never heard of that. On the other hand, students in Juneau were concerned about whether or not there should be an attempt to build a road into Junnau that may upset the ecology

of the environment, or what to do about the bears that end up getting sick and being shot

after getting into people's garbage cans. From all regions, students debated the hot issues

of Mad Cow Disease, Global Warming, and Guns in School. Students from North Pole

shared their concerns about how Global Warming may end up affecting Alaska:

> *I am concerned that we will be flooded. Why we would be flooded is because it will get so warm that Antarctica will melt. When it melts there would be more water in the ocean. The water would have to go somewhere so it would rise over the land. If Antarctica completely melts all the water would come exactly as high or close to be the same hight as the Empire State Building.*
>
> *One thing I am afraid of is the global warming. The green house gas is starting to happen to the earth the green house gas is like if you arein a room with a window and the sun can't get back out and you get very hot. It's starting to efect our plants and other foods.*
>
> *We are behind 20 inches of snow this year. That is because Global Warming we just got about 4 inches of snow. We have bad water here in North Poole But we have a solution but it is confusing. The water smells like routine eggs. Global Warming is a big concern because if the sun goes 2-3 degrees higher we will burn but if it goes down 2-3 degrees we will freeze!! The tundra will melt and the berries will stop growing and the wild life will leave! Cutting down trees is a problem to because they give us oxygen. Since we have global warming Antarctic will melt and we will get covered with water and the ocean will get more water and over flow!! Got to go Bye.*

Many of my students had never heard of this disease, and immediately began researching

it. I found a Newsweek article on the disease and shared it with the class. Most of my

students had never talked about any of the issues raised by other towns in Alaska, and

they were very curious about them after reading what their peers in other parts of the state

were writing about them. Not everyone had the same opinion, and they were eager to

share their own opinions about each topic. It was fascinating.

Citizenship: A Voice in this World

In my planning of the Online Conference for Alaskan Students, the discussion that I most looked forward to was the one on *making a difference where you live*. I had carefully planned to have the discussions go from being about primarily literal events, such as what one does in a typical day, to progressively more abstract, so that by the time they got to the discussion on making a difference, they would have some wonderfully insightful and deep things to say! Wrong! It really wasn't until the discussion on environmental concerns, which took place a couple weeks after the one on making a difference, that the students began having the type of interactive conversation for which I had been aiming and hoping. It was then that they began to comment on what each other wrote, without any prompting from me, and offer up their own opinions even when they disagreed. I don't know if it was the topic, or that it took that much time for the students to develop the skills of communication used in an online conference, or a combination of both. Perhaps the issues about the environment were of more immediate concern and interest to the students. They obviously found interesting what each other had to say. Maybe the discussion about making a difference was too abstract, and maybe I needed to present it differently, or offer some direct instruction and modeling regarding it. The discussion on environmental issues just took off like a rocket. I couldn't believe it. These students had a very strong voice in regards to the environmental issues. A girl in North Pole, Alaska wanted to comment on every issue that had been discussed:

> *My concerns about the environment is that there is that there are to many poachers. They go out and just kill the animals without taking the meat. I mean if they are going to kill the animal, they minus well eat it. Like in the summer of 1999, on moose creek, I saw a moose just lying on the side of the road. I think that we should kinda worry about Mad Cow dieseis. We also have a little problem with the garbage to. Sometimes Fox, rabbits, sometimes bears (when*

your camping), and wolves though it's not likely. Then there's Global warming. If the Global warming keeps going on, We will have Alaska be Hawaii and Hawaii be Alaska. That's going to be a bad thing.

I have concerns about Politics, drugs, doctors and animals. The concern I have about Politics is that there is to many dumb people in the world. They are greedy and will do anything to get money, even if that means killing people. And that doctors, they need to stop with all of the stuff using electronics to try to keep people alive. They do that so they can keep that alive when it is there turn to die. If they don't die then we will all die, because there won't be enough food to go around and we will all die. Then drugs. Other continents try to sell the drugs to us and try to make us weak when it comes to war. Guess What? It is working.

One of the most interesting environmental issues discussed was that of Mad Cow

Disease. Each student had his/her own opinion, and they voiced it:

F. in North Pole:
My environmental concerns are that the mad cow disease will be spreading towards Alaska. And now I havent seen many rabbits, and I'm wondering why. And its not just rabbits, its that I havent seen very much wildlife. I wonder whats happening?

C. in Juneau:
I heard that F. in North Pole has a concren about the mad cow disease. Im concernd too because who knows what will happen. But I dont think it will come over here that soon. Maybe it will be here in about 2-3 years so its not my biggest conern. My main concern is…

E. in Juneau:
F. in North Pole says that the mad cow diciease is going around and he says that he isn't seeing any wild life maybe that he is not seeing any wild life has to do with the mad cow diecease.

K. in Juneau:
F., I havin't seen that much wild life ether. But my cunsern is fast ferries and rodes because some peopel wont ferries and some wont rode. But I wont a fast ferries because I like rideing them.

B. in Juneau:
I read about F's concern about the Mad Cow Disease. If I were Frankie, I would stop hunting because if I killed an animal with the Mad Cow Disease and I had it for dinner, I would probably get the Mad Cow Disease and get sick and die.

A. in North Pole:
C. in Juneau mad cow disease is not ever going to get in to Alaska. It's not even in the lower 48. Know I do not have an environmental concern. But some people are mad because oil is gotting in to their water and poisoning the water.

M. in North Pole:
One of my other concerns is about the mad cow disease. This go's out to all the people who were writing back to F. and the people who wrote it as a general conern. Mad cow disease is starting to spread around the U.S.!! It is especially bad because we have a supermarket and we get large shipments of meat. I am scared that the next time my mom go to the store the little germyish disease bug might be in the meat that she will feed my family.

A. in North Pole:
I was reading C. in Juneau and he was wondering what mad cow disease does to you. what mad cow disease does to you is it will start eating your brain and it will kill you. The think that I am concerned about is the wildlife. People keep on dumping garbage in the water...

J. in Bettles:
This is J. in Bettles. The same thing is happening here to. That is just the cycle doing it's part. This year there is a lot of predators. Next year there will be alot of prey. Like no rabbits this year but I see more foxes than usual. Next year there will be no foxes and a lot of rabbits.

It is the strength of their voices that indicate to me their sense of citizenship in Alaska. I do believe that having the opportunity to let their voices be heard across the state strengthened their sense of being a citizen, a somebody, in this world. It certainly didn't hurt it. I look at the responses that the students wrote in their reflection of this online experience:

I like the online confrence because it can tell your opinion to everybody and it's fun at the same time.

I think it is cool to be a part of this conference because I like to talk to different people and different places.

Summary/Meta-Analysis

In looking at the three themes that stood out in the literature about online conferencing, and at the three aspects of the experience I was focusing on in my research, a big picture emerges for me. The picture is of three bridges that connect the themes to my focus areas. The first bridge is that of funding and risk-taking. This bridge connects our evolving digital world with the importance of communication skills. The second bridge is that of collaboration. This bridge connects a global classroom with the importance of multicultural education. The third bridge is that of empowerment. This bridge connects a constructivist view of learning with the importance of citizenship.

My students and I were able to embark on this experience because the school districts involved have allocated funds to the area of technology in their schools. It took more than funds, however. My students and I had to be willing to take a huge risk. Exploring the unknown is taking a risk. None of us had done this before. I was nervous about unknown glitches that I would have to deal with along the way, and about not knowing what would develop in the students' discussions. Some of the students were nervous about their inexperience with computers. However, the theme of Star Trek is popular: Going where no one has gone before. There is something exciting about that, something appealing. We took the risk, and engaged.

Being able to acknowledge and respect other points of view is an important part of successful communication in today's multicultural world. My students had the opportunity to hear what students across the state thought about many different issues, from what life would be like in the future, to the implications of Mad Cow Disease or Global Warming, to their opinions about Harry Potter. They didn't all agree with each

other. When someone disagreed, they told that person. Not once in the conference, however, did I see a message that criticized or made fun of another student. They acknowledged differences of opinion, stated their own, and moved on.

Being able to write whatever they wanted to communicate gave each student a sense of empowerment. Every one of my students wrote messages with the expectation that someone would read them. They didn't feel like they were writing without a purpose, or without an audience. The real life audience of their peers made them feel like their words, their voice, counted. To me, this is the beginning of a realization that their voice counts in this world. All of their reflections on this experience indicated that they liked communicating with other kids in the state and hearing about their lives and opinions, and sharing their own. As an "expert" on Juneau, they felt like a citizen of Juneau. As a participant in this conference, the felt like a citizen of Alaska. They appreciated that others listened and responded to their opinions, and trusted their information on Juneau. When others in the conference asked them for information about Juneau, they felt a sense of citizenship and responsibility to provide accurate information. Best of all, it was fun.

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