ABSTRACT
        Like most high schools, St. Mary's District High, Tasmania,
Australia, has a regular annual orientation day for students in transition
from Grade 6 to Grade 7. In 2000, an online element was introduced (by the
author) to supplement this process for students moving to Grade 7 in 2001.
Elementary classrooms are traditionally child-centered environments with one
main teacher focus, while secondary schools are often more timetable-driven
environments with numerous subjects, different areas, and different teachers.
In August 2000, 45 Grade 6 students attended an Orientation Day at St.
Mary's--their parents were also invited. For the first time, they saw a
demonstration of the online innovation, the "Virtual Bridge." The idea was
for the parents to feel comfortable about this use of technology, and to
understand how it was password-protected and that it was a secure and
supportive environment for their children to work in. This paper describes
the online project and how it functions. The paper notes that, besides the
pure communication aspect of the project, there were also strong student
learning outcomes underpinning the project. It concludes that the project
promoted self-directed learning and self motivation and suggests that the
project is highly transferable. (NKA)

The Virtual Bridge.

by Patricia Corby

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The Virtual Bridge

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Transition from Grade 6 to Grade 7 is a crucial stage in schooling for all students. Like most high schools, St Marys District High, Tasmania, Australia has a regular, annual orientation day for these pupils. In 2000, I introduced an online element to supplement this process for students moving to Grade 7 in 2001. The reasoning behind this project was that a one-day did not necessarily address all the personal concerns of students and parents, nor could teachers get to know the new grade 7s. Also after such visits questions often arose from discussion between students, within families and within classrooms about the following year, but with little immediate way to gain answers. Primary classrooms are traditionally child-centred environments with one main teacher focus, while secondary schools, however we try to address it, are often more timetable driven environments with numerous subjects, often in different areas and with different teachers. Hence new Grade 7 students invariably experience a period of dislocation as they learn to adjust to their new environment.

The Project in practice

In August 2000, forty-five Grade 6 students from Fingal and Bicheno Primary Schools, and from St Marys, attended an Orientation Day at St Marys District High School. Their parents were also invited. For the first time, they saw a demonstration of the online innovation, the *Virtual Bridge*. This was important as I wanted the parents to feel comfortable about this use of technology, and to understand how it was password-protected and that it was a secure and supportive environment for their children to work in. I wanted the students to have the opportunity to see how they could meet and get to know their classmates and me online.

WebCT allows the presentation of an online environment where students and their course instructor can communicate via:

- Bulletin Board where messages can be posted and read by the whole group;
- small group Bulletin Boards for communication between selected members;
- email between participants, with an easy to use address list automatically generated by the software;
- Whiteboard, this is a form of visual literacy where students can draw or write synchronously;
- Presentation areas where work can be uploaded by one person or small group and viewed by everyone;
- Chat room which can be made available for specific times and purposes and in which the conversations can be recorded;
- Homepages where a simple photo and sentence of introduction can be shared about each person. This can be an important stimulus for students making personal contact with each other but should not be introduced too early as not all students feel immediately comfortable in sharing self photos. (graphics of pets, favourite hobbies can be equally effective)

I was thus able to post a message to the main Bulletin Board and students in all 5 classroom areas could respond at a time which suited them. The message was normally a question with 'whole group' significance such as 'what are you most looking forward to next year?' The Bulletin Board was also an area for sharing current work, so students got the feeling that they were not isolated and that what happened in their own classroom was quite likely to be happening in another. Further, sharing their varied approaches gave an enriching aspect to the topic under discussion.

Chat and Whiteboard are tools in the WebCt course that one can either have available all the time or hide and then reveal for a specific purpose or occasion. Their use was just for fun and gave that feeling of connectedness to students as they communicated across the network. I had these available on request or when there was a specific time set aside. I found that students in one classroom would ask to use a Chat Room to chat to students in another, opting for the smaller rather than whole group opportunity. In practice students do better when there are not too many chatting at once. Many people in a Chat Room means that messages appear very quickly, which can be hard for students who read more slowly. All are challenged by having to follow several trains of thought at the same time.

The email option allowed students to communicate with me directly and privately. The key factor about email and Bulletin Board use is that the instructor of such a course needs to log on daily to watch the flow and answer comments to them immediately. When you are not visible physically you have to be available electronically. The personal response from teacher to student is very powerful in promoting student self esteem and confidence; it also encourages them to move out towards new peers and to more readily engage in communication with them.

Within the email traffic were the questions too embarrassing to ask before the whole group, the 'what if's' that worry students. For example: 'If I forget my homework at high school what happens?' Also there were questions about me, what I like to do in my spare time, have I any pets, all aimed at getting to know the person they would be working with in the next year. It is easy to overlook how well students in primary school get to know their teachers, whom they see for the most part of each day. They need to get to know their new secondary teachers in a similar way. Knowledge is power and if you feel at ease and comfortable with an adult, and have learnt more about a new situation then that gives you greater confidence and helps you relax more in the new environment.

Other aspects of WebCt which were useful were the creation in FrontPage of material I wanted the students to read and I would attach this to an icon on the site Homepage with a title such as 'New Ideas to look at' or something sounding more interesting than 'straight' work. I could add links here to our school home page for students to take a virtual tour - a great opportunity for an online orienteer or scavenger quiz. I could share other sites which might link to their expressed interests

Some lessons learned.

I thought it would be a good idea to make the WebCt Home page in the colours of the secondary school and include the school's logo. I thought this visual image would promote maturity and keep the students' attention subtly focused on the goal of moving smoothly towards secondary school.

Close contact with the Primary classroom teacher was important, as frequently they had matters they wanted to share about their students. I allowed them access to the site so they were part of their students' growth and development and could watch the Bulletin Board sharing between their students and others. The teachers were silent not vocal participants on the site. The students had learnt the difference between messages on the Bulletin Board which could be read by everyone and those sent by mail which were private and between themselves, their friends or me. Any issues or observations the teachers wished to make were conveyed to me using email.

As it was a new venture it seemed sensible to evaluate its impact and as a team of teachers across the 3 schools, to decide whether we thought it had been worthwhile for students and should be continued in the following year. I believe that much of the success came from this teamwork approach and their observations towards the end of the project assisted in the evaluation process.

When students seemed slow to engage or didn't appear for a span of time, I could use the WebCt tracking tool. If they were in the site but silent, I would send them a chatty private email to see how they were feeling, and asking them a question to help them find a reason to reply. If this didn't activate a response I would contact their teacher to check that all was well. In this way I kept track of all student input. I came to know more about different students' work patterns, communication skills and also what was happening at the feeder primary schools in terms of events and activities which might be influencing their use of the site. Whilst every effort was made to facilitate and encourage participation, if a child chose not to, then this was accepted.

I had clearly explained my view of netiquette when we had first met, and by my daily logging on, had opportunity to delete or edit any inappropriate messages. For example crudely put messages or ones containing rude remarks or "put downs". These I may say were few, and mostly occurred from spelling errors more than intent to be impolite. If this did happen I always contacted the student privately to let them know why I had altered or deleted their message.

Primary classrooms differed in their approach to students using the site. One teacher made a chart she posted on the wall and asked students to tick off when they had been online; another posted a chart giving students suggested times which suited her daily programme for them to log on. A third left them to their own devices and to make their own choices, a fourth allowed lunchtime and before-school access – it varied according to the teacher's classroom management style. It was however an important aspect for me to chat to the teachers about my initial visit to their classroom; it helped them plan and it helped me appreciate their individual approaches.

Computers inevitably cause technical problems at some time or other - usually when it is least convenient! For this reason it was important to have onside each school's technical support person. By explaining the project to the technician and gaining their early support, assistance was always readily available The only recurrent problem was students' forgetting passwords, but the primary teachers devised their own systems to overcome this. For example passwords relating to key events or people in the child's life or objects significant to their hobbies.

Student Learning Outcomes
While there had been a strong intention to communicate with students, to get to know them and for them to get to know each other, there were also strong student learning outcomes underpinning the project. Clearly student upskilling in the use of computers for communication was a major aspect, but with this came improved competency in using the keyboard, greater understanding of the Internet, netiquette, password usage and safety issues, how to open files, save files and so on.

Literacy skills were put to the test, as students were keen to communicate and thus engage in writing and reading of materials exchanged between them and the instructor. Email seemed to inspire even the slowest and least able; they wanted to make themselves understood and have a reply especially for them, so they had added incentive to write and read. I didn't view it as my role to correct spelling or grammar, the aim was to encourage students to communicate spontaneously. For many practice improved these aspects. I was careful of course to model these in my replies and postings.

Consideration for others, understanding difference, appreciating social and cultural matters all occurred as students took part in this project. Wealth or non-wealth was accepted, particular religious viewpoints and various styles of family living were appreciated as students came to recognize different backgrounds and perspectives. As a result there were noticeable self-esteem boosts as confidence grew and learning about others and different circumstances took place. Students were encouraged to think responsibly about their futures and to build on the positives of their primary school experience. It was noticeable that some of the usual difficulties for students interacting with each other were minimized online; one's looks, other personal characteristics, and so on, were not so significant. Had there been a special-needs student who required teacher aide assistance in the group then even this would have been 'invisible'; they would have participated online on an equal footing with any other student.

The project also allowed students to show initiative, for them to think creatively and suggest ideas. It promoted self-directed learning and self motivation. In a short evaluation students had opportunity to complete at the end of the project, this first group of students suggested for the next year that perhaps we could introduce a joke area. They thought it would be fun for each group in turn to offer the 'joke of the week'. They also suggested they could play games online, such as chess. Another idea they had was a video-conference link. These same students were wonderful helpers when the site was launched

in the second year. They assisted the new Grade Co-ordinator, showing her what to do and modelling use of the site at the first Orientation Day for the next group of students.

*   *   *   *   *

I believe this project is highly transferable. The Virtual Bridge opened communication and demystified what are often seen to be barriers or hurdles for students crossing from primary to secondary. It also focused on various literacies – technical, written and visual. What happened in this project could be used for students in many different situations – other Grade 6 to 7 clusters, for students from Grade 10 to 11, for students attempting a collaborative project of another nature. Whilst it was the initial idea of one person, it has become a repository for the ideas of many.

Students clearly enjoyed the experience and moved comfortably towards secondary schooling. They talked about having made new friends and said that high school wasn't 'scary' for them because they had been able to ask the Grade 7 Coordinator the questions they had (and she replied straight away). Their parents appreciated the obvious efforts being made to facilitate their child's entry to secondary school and that this was being done through a safe and supportive environment. Primary teachers believed that the personal knowledge about their ex-students, beyond test data information, had helped the St Marys teachers to prepare more comprehensively for the new Grade 7s in 2001. These colleagues and the Principals of each school had given wholehearted support to the project. The Principal of St Marys in 2001 observed that in their first week of high school, the new-Grade 7 students behaved more like students in their sixth week. It was noticeable that no class changes were required that first term; the co-ordinator's knowledge of the students was significantly higher than in previous years so that when groupings were done they were done with the benefit of that personal understanding of the students and their literacy abilities gained from this *Virtual Bridge* experience.

As Co-ordinator of the project I felt I had been able to work in a highly creative and exciting way with students and that in doing so had developed a concept that could make a real difference for students in transition to high school, from the known to an unfamiliar environment. I also felt that there were many more ideas we could trial within the project and that each new group of students would be able to contribute and to leave their groups' individual mark on it. At its conclusion for that first year it seemed not an end but rather a beginning.

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