Learning without

By Sue Anderson

Borders

In 2010, State College Area School District (SCASD) in Pennsylvania, USA, agreed to help develop a virtual international classroom exchange called the Schoolwires Greenleaf program. The program's project-based curriculum paired U.S. students with Chinese learners to collaborate, foster global citizenship, and prepare students for the digital work environment.

I agreed to pilot Greenleaf with a group of students from my high school social studies class because I liked the idea of my learners building firsthand connections with peers in another country. I also supported the program's approach to tech integration, which mirrored our own. We guide our instruction by our curriculum goals, and then we incorporate technology and other tools to support them. I knew I would have the support and guidance of our technical wizard, Jane Sutterlin, who is our high school's instructional technology specialist.

Schoolwires is a U.S. company that provides web-based collaboration tools, and the Greenleaf program grew out of its focus on tech integration. The company asked us to partner with the Beijing Yu Yuan Tan Middle/High School to develop curriculum that Schoowires would deliver to us through its technology platform. During the pilot, we provided feedback to Schoolwires about its platform and the collaborative tools the company incorporated into its product.

Before and during the pilot, I collaborated online with teachers Crystal Wang and Celia Yan from Yu Yuan Tan. Because we worked in different time zones, our communication was, and still is, largely through email. However, we have also conducted video and Skype conference calls.

Standards and Curriculum

We divided the Greenleaf program into six units, each supporting ISTE's NETS, the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (NCSS), and the Common Core State Standards. Here are the six units:

- Team building and digital citizenship
- Where do you live?
- Our futures in school and career
- Global citizenship
- Landmark locations
- Iconic images

This structure allowed me to integrate digital age technology and collaboration skills into my social studies objectives. The curriculum addresses the following topics:

- Global awareness: understanding the issues that the world is facing as a global community
- Global citizenship: what it means to be a responsible and active citizen of the world
- Diversity and multicultural understanding: learning how to interact and communicate in a multicultural environment
- Project-based learning: thinking critically, synthesizing information and social interactions, and creating tangible and relevant solutions

Communication and Etiquette

The first unit helps students familiarize themselves with the technology platform (Nimbus from Schoolwires). Students learn how to use it as they introduce themselves to their Chinese counterparts and start developing collaborative relationships. A key part of this process is learning how to communicate appropriately with someone from a different culture.

Understanding basic etiquette in virtual communications is an important part of digital citizenship. We teach this at our school, but giving students an authentic experience is much more meaningful. The communication challenges we faced provided valuable firsthand lessons for my students. It made them aware that they needed to be conscious of their audience when communicating. Working out communication issues required problem-solving and collaboration skills that will come in handy when they enter the global workplace.

Our participation in Greenleaf also led to discussions about online safety. Students often do not understand that there are certain guidelines to follow when corresponding by email with people you don't know. Add cultural differences to the mix, and misunderstandings can abound. Although the Schoolwires platform is secure and available only to authorized users, it created an opportunity to teach students how to communicate safely online.

In the first year, we assigned students to groups that communicated as teams. One of the exercises asked our students to create a FAQ page with answers to questions

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posed by the Chinese participants. Students also created a shared blog to cover the topics of food, sports, holidays, and celebrations. These activities gave the Chinese students the opportunity to practice writing in English, and my students learned to practice their formal writing skills.

Because their Chinese partners were learning to translate English, our students had to be very thoughtful in their writing. They had to be sure to avoid slang, idioms, and abbreviated language, among other informalities, as these are lost on the Chinese students, who translate our text literally.

We had some interesting and amusing experiences the first year. For example, sometimes the Chinese students sent emails with all capital letters. Our students felt this was the equivalent of shouting. They shared this with the Chinese students who changed their format. Also, the translation skills of the Chinese students produced some unusual correspondence at times. One Chinese student was trying to communicate that she was excited to see a video we were working on, but our students thought that she was mad because of the time it was taking us to complete it. By the end, both groups showed improvement in skills and communication.

Cultural Exchange

It was interesting to see students' perceptions change. For example, my students confirmed their impression that Chinese youth spend more time in school and more time studying. They were surprised to learn that the Chinese students don't necessarily love to do that. The Chinese students were intrigued by how much free time our learners have.

One of our students remarked, "I learned how alike we actually are. I guess I had stereotypes of Chinese people. You know, they like school and all that stuff, but they're really just a lot like me. They like sports. They like pop culture. They like animals. They like traveling."

This year, we are taking a different approach by pairing each U.S. student with a Chinese student. In these one-to-one pairings, students can get to know each other better as individuals. My students have told me it is exciting when they find a common interest, such as swimming or certain TV shows, with a peer on the other side of the world.

To foster communication, the Greenleaf platform provides social media tools, and the curriculum incorporates specific assignments for using them. Some communication tools include: online chat, blogging, wall posts, and real-time polling.

The unit "Our Futures in School and Career" is a good example of how the curriculum outlines the use of the tools for specific activities:

- A teacher creates a poll that lists different choices students have after high school: four-year college, two-year college, trade school, military service, workforce, travel, etc.
- Students respond to the poll.
- Students post their prediction of the results on a discussion board.
- Once the poll is closed, students reflect on the results in a blog post and post their interests. All members comment on each other's posts.

Real-World Workforce Challenges

During our pilot year, Schoolwires was trying out different platforms, which led to some opportunities for us to develop our problem-solving skills. For example, for the first unit, we decided that teams at the two schools would create videos, share them, and edit them to create a single 15-minute video that compares and contrasts two cultures. Each team created videos and storyboarded how the final video would look. Unfortunately, the video files were too large and couldn't be sent back and forth. So rather than

collaborating throughout the process, we decided to have the U.S. team do the rough draft and the Chinese students do the editing. The new curriculum addresses this issue by paring down the length and including photographs so the overall file size of the video is smaller.

We did not have the same technologies as the Chinese school, and this led to some challenges. Surprisingly, we found that the Chinese students were not as comfortable with technology as our students. There were also format issues to address. For example, the Chinese were using older versions of Microsoft Word and PowerPoint that we couldn't open. We use Google Docs, but the Chinese government prohibits access to this application.

In response, Schoolwires has since created a tool within the platform where students can work collaboratively on a document. Although these challenges were frustrating at times, they gave my students an authentic experience that they might encounter again in the workforce. Logistical, technical, and language issues, as well as an ambitious curriculum, created some challenging moments. It was a good troubleshooting experience for everyone, and the students handled the bumps in the road with grace, patience, and resiliency.

We are now in the second year of the program, and Greenleaf is available to other districts. As an educator, I have enjoyed the opportunity to collaborate with teach-ers from another country. I learned that teachers share the same joys and frustrations whether they are in China or the United States, and I feel like I have two new friends in Beijing. The problem-solving and collaborative skills that my students and I gained from this experience are unforgettable.

Resources

Partnership for 21st Century Skills: www.p21.org
Schoolwires Greenleaf Virtual Cultural Exchange Program:
   www.schoolwires.com/greenleaf
State College Area School District: www.scasd.org

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