

**USING ONLINE FACILITATION TO ENCOURAGE STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN
COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS ONLINE:
GOOD DEEDS IEARN PROJECT IN ACTION**

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*“The smallest good deed is better than the grandest intention.” –
A Proverb*

Abstract

Encouraging student participation in meaningful online collaborative projects is important in the learning process since it involves students in practical, hands-on experiences and raises their awareness of issues related to their local societies and/or educational needs. Although the use of online educational interaction still poses many challenges, it also provides outstanding learning outcomes.

This paper describes the outcomes of an ongoing iEARN (<http://www.iearn.org/>) project that uses a variety of blended learning techniques. Included are summaries of technical requirements, pedagogical and technological methods, and achievements, plus comments on feedback and expected outcomes for future action plans.

Introduction

Technology in education can be a challenge which poses a dilemma for teachers who are willing - or obliged - to use it in their classes. It gives rise to the question of how teachers could involve themselves and their students in more dynamic learning opportunities through the use of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and blended-learning technologies in general.

The formation of a new paradigm in distance education was predicted by many educators before it became widely used, and the potential for facilitation of interaction in group activities has long been considered its greatest strength. For example, Mason and Kaye (1990) described computer conferencing as representing a new paradigm for online learning which can provide enhanced opportunities for dialogue, debate, and conversational learning as well as

fostering a “sense of community” when students were exposed to other students’ experiences and opinions.

When teachers are asked to implement technology, they often think about highly sophisticated software programs or online applications and wonder if they will be able to afford up-to-date software or the licenses for using such applications.

The process could be easier than most would imagine. Technology in the 21st century is a medium of communication, knowledge, and development. The way in which technology can be applied and adopted requires each of us to understand and make decisions based on facilities which are personally and locally available. These advances have resulted in the formation of new types of communities focused on a huge range of interests. Many researchers and social anthropologists have noted that communities of practice (CoPs) exist everywhere. We may have main roles in some of them but in other communities, our roles might be more marginal (Smith, 2003). The concept is not new Redfield (1960) discusses systems and processes for the basic human needs used by such communities: the needs for survival, nurturance, socialization and support, cosmological or ideological perspectives, and a cohesive context from which a sense of identity, belonging, meaning, and purpose can develop. One important element in CoPs is that most of the members in such communities are practitioners with diverse levels of background and expertise: each community with its unique formation of different members develops a “shared repertoire” of resources, projects, experiences, and skills in a “short shared practice” as Wenger (2006) describes it.

With the formation of online communities, new dimensions of learning, practicing and involvement are afforded in the virtual world. The involvement of practitioners from all over the world, communicating and interacting with them at any time has now become possible.

Individuals, organizations, and universities are examining the potential of online CoP “networks” to enable members of such communities to share knowledge and engage in “ongoing workplace learning and professional development” (Gray, 2004). Such communities may include students and/or teachers operating in the same educational setting or environment.

In this paper, I share a simple personal initiative which shows one possibility of using free online tools to encourage voluntary participation in collaborative and global learning projects from students and teachers in schools and educational centers in several different countries. By global learning, I mean ongoing acquired learning that focuses on students as the main factor and which enables students to develop their own learning goals based on their local needs. The outcome of this learning experience is global in its nature since it can be used, adopted, or implemented by other groups and communities elsewhere.

Brainstorming

I first thought of the *Good Deeds* project (<http://www.earn.org/projects/gooddeeds.html>) & (http://ifayed.com/Main_Folders/Papers/iEARN_03/GDeeds.htm) after a discussion with another teacher and two high school students in which ideas we shared regarding the importance of involving students in student-centered activities to help them acquire new skills and values. The students shared ideas about what they needed to do in their community and, eventually, the world. They asked the challenging question “How can we, as the citizens of this new global community, change both our local community and the world?” We concluded that changing one’s personality and attitude are the main keys to changing any society, and that it’s best if change comes from within while a person is still young.

It was also obvious that we needed to see the “goodness” within ourselves first in order to apply this in our behaviors and dealings with those who are around us. For that reason, we chose the title “*Good Deeds*”. We used simple instructions and ideas to present GD to participating students. “*Share with us some good deeds you have achieved, even simple ones, showing the details and motives behind your acts*” was our motto.

Project Description

Explaining the scope of the project and including members of different cultures and groups were our first goals. The values targeted were listed as well as the methodology needed from facilitators and other teachers involved in the project.



Figure 1. Logo

Members were encouraged to use a variety of approaches and methods of face-to-face and virtual communication modalities to participate. Example face-to-face activities included meetings and orientation sessions, group activities, student conferences, poster productions, story writings, and field trips. Furthermore, students could share their achieved and/or planned activities with all the members in the community via virtual tools; e.g., using the online forum, publishing websites and links, attending online conferences, sending e-mail, and participating in informal chat sessions. Some of the best contributions were published on a new platform for online writing and publishing or a blog (<http://ismailfayed.netfirms.com/weblog03/blogger2.html>) which was used to recognize some of the posts, contributions, reports, and ideas posted by students.

The following chart shows activities that teachers and other educators could use to facilitate the teaching/learning process using the means of communication described here:

Click for [Figure 2](#)

Figure 2. Possible blended learning activities in online collaborative projects.

Curriculum Focus

Some of the considerations while developing this project were the following:

- Using English as a target language for communication and interaction
- Improving reading and writing skills
- Developing critical thinking skills
- Encouraging self-expression and other communicative skills
- Including activities which focused on the arts
- Fostering the development of positive values in human relationships

Many teachers used Good Deeds to focus on other educational areas of interest based on the courses they taught in their schools or the needs of that community. As a result, the majority of the participating members experienced an enriched learning environment.

Planning and Organization

After writing a project proposal and gaining acceptance for the project, the next step was having our online discussion forum ready for our members to use:

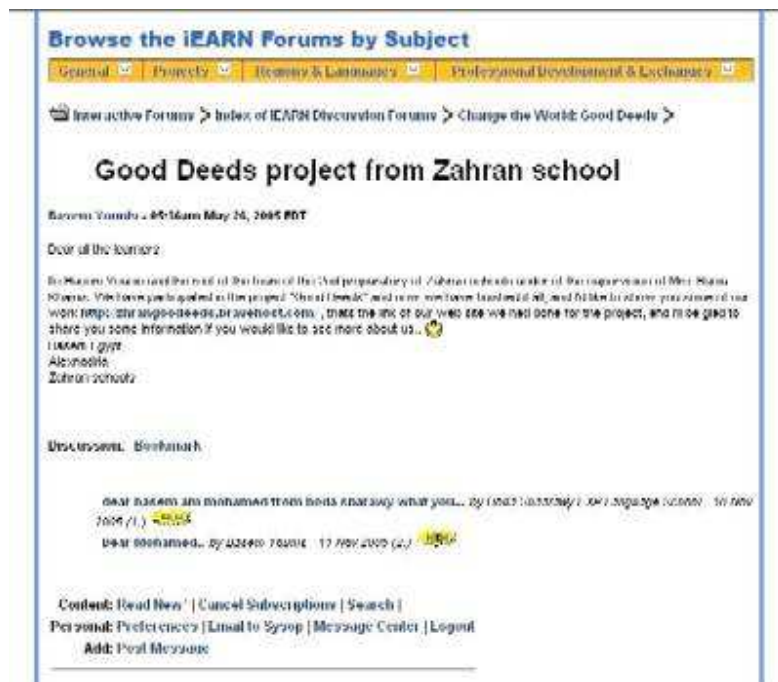


Figure 3. Students online forum (<http://foro.learn.org/WebX?14@@.f5f09de>).

I also started preparing the outline for a free website to publish *Good Deeds* materials, links, and blog entries of the students' best contributions, as shown below:



Figure 4. *Good Deeds* Student Blog 2005

(http://ismailfayed.netfirms.com/Papers/iEARN_03/GDeeds.htm).

When the project began, I was working as an Educational Technology Program Specialist in a large educational teacher-training program in Egypt: the Integrated English Language Program II (IELP-II, <http://cit.aed.org/ielp.htm>). The program's main aim was to implement and encourage life-long learning amongst students, teachers and other educators. Other goals and expected outcomes of this project included:

- raising educators', teachers' and students' awareness, skills, expertise, and educational standards;
- implementing new trends in teaching and language education in our project, such as encouraging collaborative learning opportunities made possible by video-conferencing, interactive web tools, and active, student-centered learning.

Shortly after we started the first phase of the project, I moved to Saudi Arabia to teach. However, it was not so difficult to implement the project at a distance since iEARN Egypt (<http://www.learneypt.org/>) was willing to announce the project in various schools within the country. Some teachers in Egypt took the initiative in conducting orientation sessions for several educational centers in order to encourage new members to participate in the project.

Activities and Project Collaboration

There was no specific syllabus. Instead, we had a collection of possible activities to be implemented with the help of other teachers/facilitators in classrooms, during break times, in community activities, and while online. The extra-curricular focus increased the amount of interaction and collaboration and made the process more dynamic and better able to fit the local needs of each partner. Some of the first proposed activities for this project included activities with f-2-f, synchronous, and asynchronous aspects, e.g.:

- Exchanging e-mail among community members and coordinators
- Discussing topics and issues of interest to students through the online forum
- Developing a web page (which included media files, photos, and other dynamic content) for the project
- Organizing online live chat sessions to allow students to talk about their individual situations and to meet and socialize with other students and coordinators
- Presenting different formats of literary and art works, with the possibility of being compiled, edited, and published in an annual booklet
- Including other suggested activities that coordinators or students may have raised during the course of the project



Figure 5. Example ‘good deeds’: Zahran School students in a field trip to an orphanage, Alexandria, Egypt 2004 (http://us.learns.org/collaborate/programs/bridge/bridge_project_highlights.php).

Collaboration, student-centered learning, and dynamic interaction were all stressed in the following activities, which combined online and f-2-f experiences that teachers and students could be involved with under the guidance of their online facilitators.

Activities for Teachers

- Attending workshops to develop teachers’ professional skills

- Inviting teachers to present the project in other schools and give workshops about Good Deeds
- Enrolling in iEARN online educational courses
- Participating in the online forum or contacting other teachers for brainstorming and follow-up on projects taking place
- Contacting country coordinators or project facilitators for more information about the project or for future ideas related to the project
- Getting together in online meetings and conferences

Activities for Students

- Writing to the forum (using their teachers' emails)
- Contributing new ideas or initiatives with the help of their teachers, then helping to write their schools' action plans
- Writing stories and articles about the theme of Good Deeds
- Participating in field trips where they help other community members and then report the outcomes of their efforts
- Forming groups and project committees
- Developing website links, posters, or drawings about Good Deeds themes

Online Education (Teaching/Learning) Requirements

Educators in developing nations tend to talk about technology as the magic key to addressing paradigm shifts in education, but they don't explain how to make it available and user-friendly for other educators. These, new paradigms in education with their unique challenges and requirements are presenting themselves to educators worldwide in the form of new online tools and innovative methods in teaching, interaction, and even assessment. In order to be involved in a project such as this one each student, teacher, or administrator, must develop skills to meet the emerging technical requirements.

Similarly, to the old "literacy" concept, where people needed to be able to "literate" in order to learn further, within the new dimensions and requirements, there are four "challenges" which any educational institution interested in the implementation of CALL and online projects in its system must meet. These challenges involve new requirements in

1. technical expertise
2. facilities available within the educational environments
3. the attitudes of the stakeholders
4. the structure of the educational systems supporting education such as state-wide or governmental standards

Click for [Table 7](#)

Table 7. Online collaborative projects: Four main challenges

Ministries of education, especially in the developing countries, still have doubts about the importance and outcomes of online education e.g. establishing distance education programs, incorporating online learning platforms at an official level, and accrediting the educational degrees obtained via distance programs. Professional development of educators suffers from too little recognition given to this by the concerned partners. Prendergast (2004) draws decision-makers' attention to the fact that they need to understand certain fundamental distinctions in teaching approaches if they want to implement online training successfully. In order for teachers, administrators, and decision makers to overcome the above challenges and raise the standards and the quality of the educational process, these concerns should be addressed in all aspects of online education as new trends expand to educational institutions throughout the world.

Project Expected Outcomes

Based on the four considerations identified above, several expected outcomes were identified as long-term goals for the *Good Deeds* project. Among them, non-stop learning and development experiences are the main priorities. Yet another goal is to develop professional skills in different technical and non-technical domains.

As a representative of an educational project for all educators, I have kept these goals in mind while working on this project. My vision concerning these outcomes is represented in four main sections. The first goal, and most important for many educators, is how to develop their technical expertise and professional performance in any field of study/work. The second goal is to provide appropriate dynamic tools for that life-long learning process, as clarified in the pervious section. The third and fourth goals are concerned with people's attitude and the educational systems available in the world today. For example, governments, and other educational institutions should provide sufficient funding for computer labs and software for online projects such as ours. Then, a final step might be granting the proper accreditation and credentials for the "graduates" of such programs.

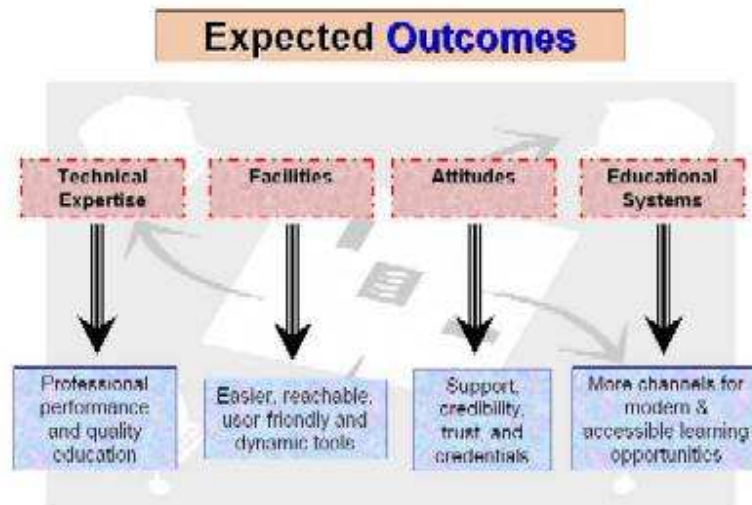


Figure 8. Project expected outcomes

Student-Centered Online Learning with Multiple Classrooms

The overall idea of online projects is not only to get students more involved in a project, but also to shift the focus of a learning situation onto the students. Student-centered collaborative learning based on projects can achieve this goal. Many students find that such an approach creates an atmosphere which is appropriate where they learn freely, discuss issues, raise questions, listen to others, and experience a friendly learning atmosphere while minimizing factors that may negatively affect the learning/teaching process.

Stacey (1999) mentioned that collaborative community learning was achieved through the development of a group understanding of knowledge through communicating different perspectives, receiving feedback from other students and tutors, and discussing ideas until a final negotiation of understanding was reached. She believes that the interactive communication process is facilitated through using CMC tools to establish a vehicle for socially-constructed learning at a distance.

Teachers revel in the moments when they see motivation and interest in the eyes of their students. Accordingly, virtual learning can raise student interest and motivation in a progressive way. Students can share and learn a great deal, at their own convenience, and have fun at the same time.

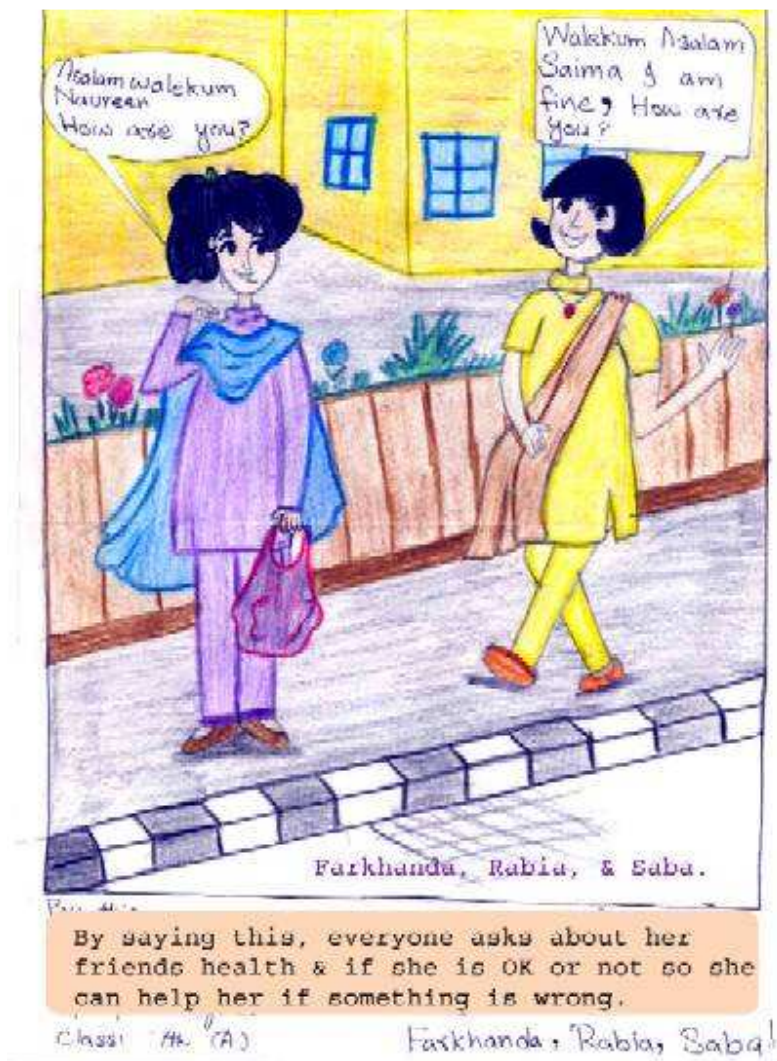


Figure 9. A picture submitted by SOS school students, Lahore, Pakistan 2005.

Getting Educators on Board

When the project was first announced to all iEARN members and schools throughout the world, teachers from several different countries showed interest in the project. It is normally difficult to proceed even after teachers/partners show interest in such a project because some (or many) drop out. In our case, making the project as flexible as possible was an advantage. Because teachers and students might have felt worried, overburdened, or even afraid of not meeting specific deadlines, we tried to make this experience an *oasis-for-resorting* rather than an *assignment-to-do* experience.

Project Current Outcomes

We cannot say yet that the project has met its original goals. As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, the overall scope of this project is open and could be extended to include many different learning goals and objectives, depending on groups of students, courses presented, and the local needs of the various communities in our project. In this ongoing process, we teach a value or topic, practice it, reflect on it, get feedback, and then plan for a new value or topic.

The main achievements of this project have been to raise students' awareness of the global issues and problems of their community, change their attitudes, and involve them more in leadership opportunities where they can help other members of the community or even help themselves think and act positively. The means to accomplish this are still being implemented at many educational facilities with the help of tools being trialed by many users. Excelling in using the tools is not the main goal, but being able to use them and apply newly learned values through the help of such facilities is what we are after.

Project outcomes are not necessarily planned only for students, even if students are the intended clients. Many teachers find opportunities to apply the teaching methods and initiatives offered in this project through the help of other teachers or by adapting them in a local course being taught in a certain school somewhere around the globe.

The project promotes many personal values that don't necessarily require reported outcomes or specific achievements. Rather, the groups share and learn from each other on a regular basis. This might help other teachers or facilitators while developing their educational projects or courses.

A teacher from Uzbekistan made the following comments on her experience in the project:

Good Deeds project is one of the projects that strongly influenced on minds of children, children had invited veterans of Second World War for lunch and arranged a little party for them with old songs that were popular at the time when veterans were young and in final presented little gifts to each veteran. For that veterans have told children about good deeds they or their friends have done during the war and their life in general.
(Natalya Amanovna, 2004)



Figure 10. Good Deed friends with veterans in Uzbekistan (<http://natalya.freenet.uz/ac.html>).

Project Expansion

When we started the project in 2003, we had about thirty members participating from ten schools in six countries. In 2004, almost ninety members from twenty-eight schools and six different countries had joined. The current number of newly joined participants is almost seventy from nineteen new schools. In general, this community is growing gradually to include an estimated total of approximately 170 members, students and teachers from about forty-seven schools in fifteen different countries.

It would have been impossible to imagine that our project would have grown to such an extent. Now, however, connecting and interacting globally is no longer just a dream; instead, it has become an important aspect of our daily lives.



Figure 11. *Good Deeds* global map – 2006.

Implications for further development

All the processes and plans mentioned above are subject to future development, modification, and/or replacement. It is becoming a fact that many teachers learn about new computer programs and applications from their students or even their children! Because of that and since new technologies are appearing throughout the world, educators and facilitators need to be flexible and open to all forms of development, change, and exchange of new knowledge and expertise with reference to new applications, methods, and learning tools.

To conclude, this project has helped many educators and facilitators understand the nature of online projects in an educational setting. It was one of few projects sponsored by iEARN Egypt and proved to be a leading one that has captured the attention of many teachers nationwide and abroad. It is inspiring to hear about all the new students who have become interested in the project and are so enthusiastic to share their ideas by posting to the forum or organizing special events for the project in their schools or local communities in countries, such as Egypt, Russia, the USA, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and many others. I am hoping it will serve as a pioneer in the field for many years to come.

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Editor's notes

This presentation was made as a regular session at the Webheads in Action Online Convergence on November 19, 2005. The session took place in the Learning Times Elluminate presentation room. A recording was made and can be heard at <http://home.learningtimes.net/learningtimes?go=1042158> .The original presentation materials can be found here: http://ifayed.com/Main_Folders/Papers/Wia2005/Wia2005/Wia2005.htm.