

This student collaborative project aims to connect students across Australia, and globally, and in doing so create and nurture relationships and friendships as well as opportunities to share and learn and work as a team.

There are a variety of ways that you can manage these relationships with another school:

- Using 'snail mail', students can choose to write letters, send photographs or even exchange taped greetings to each other.
- Or you can communicate using the Internet and the many online communication tools it offers (email, blogs, discussion forums etc).

It is up to you to determine how you would like to communicate with a partner school.

Prior Learning

- Students will need to have an understanding of how to work well in a cooperative group.
- Students should be good at planning a variety of writing tasks and following the broad steps of drafting, conferencing and improving on their work.
- Students will need to be comfortable using online communication tools such as email, blogs, discussion forums.

Activity Description

Step 1 – Preparation and planning

Finding your partner school

Your partner school can be found anywhere – in the next suburb, the next town, the next state or in another country. Its location is not as important as its commitment to undertaking a rich, relevant collaborative activity with you.

There are a number of ways that you can find your partner school:

- Your own networks and friendships with teachers from other schools is a good start;
- Your Department of Education might be able to help;
- You could do a web search of schools in a particular area and make contact through their email address or mailing address;
- Oz Projects <<http://ozprojects.edna.edu.au>> offers a range of opportunities to join in or create your own online curriculum project and also links to other online collaborative project websites.
- iEARN <<http://iearn.org/>> is the world's largest non-profit global network that enables teachers and young people to use the Internet and other new technologies to collaborate on projects that both enhance learning and make a difference in the world or
- You could undertake a Google Search using search parameters like the type of school, location or geographical features that interest you. For instance, try *elementary school+mountains* or *secondary school+coast* and you'll find a huge list to choose from!

Making contact is easy these days...its' sustaining that contact meaningfully that's more challenging!

Privacy is a crucial issue to consider at all stages of your project participation and keeping the wider school community, especially parents, informed will help to allay any fears or concerns. It is important at this stage that the parents of your students are informed about your class' participation in a student collaborative project. This can be done through a letter that goes home or an article in the school newsletter. Outline the type of information that will be shared with the partner school, such as student work (stories, letters, photographs, art work, audio and video recordings), which may include basic information about the students and their families.

Think carefully about what the aim or focus of your collaboration will be. These questions might help to get you started with your class:

1. what do we want to know about the community with which we make contact?

2. How will this collaboration contribute to our learning about *natural disasters, emergency preparedness, actions people take during emergencies, our feelings about risks and hazards* etc
3. What will the curriculum and learning outcomes be? What do you want the students to do, learn, think and produce by being part of this collaboration and how will this be documented, shared and assessed?

Step 2 – Initial contact with your partner school colleague

Working out the how's and the what's

At this stage, it is vital that you decide on the best method of communication and contact with your partner school and the theme of the collaboration.

As the teacher facilitating the project, correspond with your partner colleague and negotiate the best means of communication between the students. The time this will take will inevitably be influenced by your partner school's access to technology, their time zone, their language, and school year dates.

Working this out may only take a few days if you both have easy access to email, but it may take a month or more if you need to write a letter and post it. The design of your collaboration and interaction will be informed by both your (and their) access to technology within each classroom. Work on getting the understanding between the two classes clear and agreed upon as soon as possible.

Step 3 – Agreeing on the boundaries of the project

Managing expectations

This is an ideal time to establish the boundaries of the project with your partner colleague. You can draw on the notes in the attached Getting Started Checklist (Handout 1) to assist with this step. If you do this now, you will be able to develop a relationship which could extend beyond duration of this collaborative project and which may cause fewer frustrations because you have the same expectations.

You might also want to discuss and agree on the focus of the collaborative project. Handout 2 to this activity provides a list of collaborative project ideas all with the common theme of emergency management. Another approach could be to discuss and negotiate with your students the focus of the project and then when you first make contact with your partner school invite them to participate in the project that you and your students have decided upon.

Step 4 – Whole class activity

Build further on what do you know and what can you find out?

Once the school with which you are to be partnered has been decided, work more closely with your class to familiarise them with the region / city / country / language / culture of the partner school.

Explore the students' prior knowledge about the location of partner school and any natural disasters that they might know have occurred there. Identify the things they would like to learn. You began thinking about this in Step 1, now build on this to provide more detail for your planning.

You could use various strategies like a KWL (What I Know, What I Want to Know, What I have Learned) graphic organiser to do this (see Handout 3 for template).

Step 5 – Small group activity

The first task for you and your partner school

Pair up your students and ask them to begin by writing short, snappy autobiographies which include information like their age, gender, family, cultural background, nickname, interests, hobbies, sports, music preferences, where they live, what they see when they look out their bedroom windows and a few funny or moving stories. They might start with a description of a disaster that might have hit their community – a fire that swept through the town or a flood that inundated the local area etc.

Ask their partner to review the writing before it even goes to the Student Management Team (SMT) – if you have one (see checklist). Then, it's time to type it up or redraft it so it is ready for sending off. The autobiographies can be merged together into one word document, which can easily be printed off and

mailed or attached in an opening email. The aim may then be for you and your partner colleague to link up or buddy students with similar interests (or who sound like they might benefit from being linked with a particular student etc).

You may now choose to work with your class to develop an introductory document – hard copy or electronic – which encapsulates the first key message and introductions you want to send to your partner school.

Step 6 – Whole class activity

Some considerations when or if using email to communicate

If your students do not regularly use email as a communication tool in their learning, it may be worth discussing some behavioural expectations and negotiate and establish some clear guidelines and rules of acceptable and responsible use of email. These guidelines really apply to any form of communication that you and your class choose to use – not just email.

You might publicise these around the classroom, so that your students clearly understand how they should treat each other.

Here is a list of some key topics you may like to highlight with them.

Etiquette

- > Understand that the first language of students in your partner school may not be English, so your students need to write clearly and also be tolerant when they receive responses back that may have grammatical or spelling errors. (You could always ask them to write a letter back in the first language of your partner school to emphasise how difficult it can be to communicate in a language which is not your first language.)
- > Your students should remember that the focus for the exchange is a sharing of cultural insights and the nurturing of new friendships. They need to be polite, friendly and well mannered in their correspondence: be it in hard copy or electronic formats. Be aware of any bullying or disrespectful content in students' emails/letters.

Netiquette

- > CAPS LOCK: if you type CAPITAL LETTERS in an email, that's the web version of SCREAMING or SHOUTING – recipients could get quite offended....so be careful not to lock that key!
- > Line spacing: If you have a long email to send, try to break up and chunk together bits of information so it is easy to read. Reading on the screen is pretty difficult anyway, so if you chunk your content into paragraphs, you'll find the recipient will be able to read your points more clearly and be more receptive to what you're saying.
- > Keep your communications concise and pointed. Remember, many users don't have unlimited internet time.
- > Think of the importance of tone. This is as important in an online discussion room and in emails, as it is when you and your students are chatting face-to-face with someone. Also, think of how you sign off your emails – are you abrupt, friendly, cheery, formal? Do you use: 'bye', 'cheers', 'regards', just your name or just your signature?
- > Be careful of what you say/write: once your comments are written and emailed or posted on the web in a discussion group, they can be forwarded, cut and pasted and sent anywhere.
- > Get your students to read, re-read and read their text again before you send it...especially if the message is important. It is easy to get a message fowled up by misplaced or poorly chosen words.
- > You can add humour to your messages by using smileys, and other emoticons which you create from the characters on your keyboard. Here are some examples:

:-) happy	:-@	screaming
;-) wink	:-D	laughing
:-e disappointed	:-l	indifferent
:-(sad	:-<	mad / angry
:o surprised	a <G>	grinning

No doubt, your students will know many more and can add to this list.

- > In emails you send or post to discussion groups, always clearly identify the subject of your message in the subject line.
- > Be careful of the size of files you attach to emails: large files can be impossible to download or take several hours when the recipient only has a telephone connection.
- > Think of the format you will use for images: bitmaps take up a lot of space while jpegs tend to be smaller in size. You may have to resize an image if it is too large to send.
- > Don't think you're anonymous! It is easy to think that because you're sitting at home at your computer, that you can be considered pretty anonymous in any communications you may have. You're not. What you write, send and say needs to be considerate and considered.

Safety and Ethical considerations when using the internet

Safe and ethical use of email and the internet in your classroom is a considerable concern for most teachers. While we try to balance development of student responsibility and information literacy, we also need to ensure that we have strategies in place to deal with unacceptable use of these technologies. Issues of safety and acceptable usage need to be addressed before students access email in the initial stages of their collaborative relationship.

Acceptable Use Policies

Your school, cluster or region may already have Acceptable Use Policies (AUP) in place to outline the expectations of students using computers and sanctions for unacceptable usage. It should also cover issues of privacy and copyright, as well as the types of searches conducted, websites visited and email content sent and received. Signing an AUP will help your students to understand their rights and responsibilities that will influence their involvement in the collaborative project.

There are no quick or easy answers to deciding what is 'safe' and 'unsafe' for children communicating or collaborating beyond the school walls. As a teacher, you will need to use your professional judgement which will be in line with your school's policy approach about how best to handle these issues for your own students.

Some more hints

- > Students should use school or class email addresses rather than their own private email addresses. Students should not provide personal details such as their home address.
- > If you opt to use a chat room or weblog with your partner school, be careful to ensure it is a closed online community so that no pseudo identities or unacceptable visitors can make contact.
- > If you are publishing any student work, comments or ideas, ensure that you are always aware of privacy and avoid publicising yours or your students' personal details. Under Copyright laws, children own their own work. If a student is under the age of 18 years, you require parental permission to publish their work.
- > When you send or receive emails or Handouts such as presentations or images, ensure you have up to date virus protection software as viruses can easily be passed on by email.
- > Monitor your students' use of the technology by reviewing their input yourself or establishing a class Student Management Team (SMT). You may even consider using filtering software.
- > It is important that your students do background research and develop an understanding of the cultural similarities, differences and possible sensitivities between Australia and your partner school's country. All correspondence between these schools needs to reflect cultural awareness, respect and appreciation.
- > If your class is developing presentations which use images or text from other sources such as a third party, it is important that issues of copyright and intellectual property are considered.
- > If digital images are shared, they should not contain students' full names.

Step 7 – Maintaining and sustaining the relationship

Keeping it going

The level of involvement and interaction is completely up to you and will be defined by the class time you are able to allocate to the task and your access (and your partner colleague's access) to technology. It is up to both of you to effectively facilitate and sustain the relationship. Long distance relationships can be very rewarding but they are not always easy. Sometimes the expectations of one partner do not coincide with the other's. It is vital that you work hard to keep communication channels

between you and your colleague open, vigorous and sustained. Utilise the skills of your SMT to monitor your student involvement but also use them and your class to generate new, imaginative ideas for what to do next.

Remember, at least in the initial phase that your focus will probably be on emergency preparedness or experiences. Your students might theme some of the discussions to cover humorous or more serious topics such as:

- What's at risk in my area
- Why I'd save my pets before my parents!
- When I have had to miss school....etc

More activity ideas follow in Handout 2.

Teacher Notes

As the classroom teacher, you will be pivotal in establishing and nurturing a positive and productive long (or short) distance relationship with your partner school colleague and students. You will be the project catalyst. However, this does not and should not mean that you will be overburdened by the tasks or overwhelmed by the project's demands. The extent of work and time commitment is up to you and there are many different strategies you can use to share the responsibility and the workload with your students and with your partner colleague.

Resources / Links / Materials Required

- Access to computers with Internet connections

Handout 1: Getting started checklist

Here is a checklist to help you in your initial planning and to clearly identify and manage both your and your partner school's expectations of your student collaborative project:

- Is the partnership and the activities you are planning based on strong links to your curriculum?
- Have you agreed on a defined purpose, process of communication and structure?
 - > How often do you think you will be able to communicate with your partner school (weekly, monthly)?
 - > What are your expectations in terms of turnaround time? Do you want your class to be able to respond to your partner school within 24 hours or a week (and visa versa)?
 - > Can you readily integrate your involvement into your teaching program and easily make class time for this emergency management collaborative activity?
- Do both you and your partner school colleague have a clear understanding of the requirements and commitment levels stated and are happy to meet them?
 - > The relationship you establish needs to be founded on educational activities and sharing. The focus of this relationship is cross-cultural exchange. If your partner school is in a developing nation, you should not be expected to provide them with resources. It is up to you whether or not you and your class decide to include the sending of classroom resources like books, paint and pens as the relationship develops.
- Have you decided on clear and agreed outcomes, actions or products for the project?
 - > Will your relationship be ad hoc and reactive or themed, or a combination of both?
 - > An ad hoc/reactive approach may see you initiating contact by sending a batch of introductory letters and then waiting for responses, replying to these responses as they come and so on.
 - > A themed approach may involve you working closely with your partner colleague and planning either a project or weekly or monthly themes.
- Have you agreed upon a timeline for the initial stage of the collaborative project, which can then be reviewed and extended?
- Have you worked out your classroom management approach to best facilitate this involvement?
 - > How are you going to manage the workload? Have you thought of establishing a class Student Management Team (SMT) which will be able to assume various responsibilities within the project such as planning, troubleshooting technical problems (e.g. email issues), reviewing emails/letters before they are sent, printing out documents, training other students, helping to plan themes for correspondence and facilitate activities?
 - > On what basis do you want the project to be formed? Will it be a whole class to whole class set of communication and collaborative activities or student 'buddy' to student 'buddy' or a combination of both?

- Have you agreed on the technology requirements for the relationship and can both your schools meet them?
 - > If you are using ICT, establish what sort of connection your partner colleague has at their school or in their classroom. If access is difficult or only by a telephone line, consider sending them text-only emails and burn all your digital images and presentations onto a CD or print them out in a booklet and send them via post.

- Can both schools (teachers, students) be flexible and responsive throughout the project relationship so that the project can change direction as new opportunities and ideas arise?

Handout 2: Collaborative activity ideas

The types of collaborative activities you can undertake with your class are only restricted by your imagination. These activities can occur synchronously or asynchronously. When communication is asynchronous it does not occur in real time (right here, right now): there is a delay in receipt of and response to communications. Discussion boards, emails, weblogs, hard copy snail mail are generally asynchronous. When communication is synchronous it occurs in real time: live chat, organised live streamed video, some chat room messaging, videoconferences and teleconferences are all synchronous.

Your ability to undertake activities, which are synchronous or asynchronous, will depend on your access and your partner school's access to the different communication technologies as well as the time zone of your partner school. To help you in your planning, here are some collaborative activity ideas all of which have a common theme of emergency management:

What about our pets?

Letters or emails can include information on so many different topics. Why not suggest that your students each write about:

- > Where they live, their families and what sort of pets or animals they own/keep;
- > The types of natural disasters that can or have occurred in their area;
- > What would they do to ensure the safety of their pets/animals;

Ask them to do the same, exchange emails/letters and ask the students to provide feedback and suggestions on ways to ensure pet safety.

Let's evacuate

What is the evacuation plan for your school? How does it compare to the evacuation plan for your partner school? Why is it different? How could each plan be improved? Have you ever had to 'test' the success of an evacuation – what happened?

Disaster timeline

In pairs, ask your students to research the major natural disasters that have occurred in their state / country and draw them in a timeline. They might be able to do this in PowerPoint or Word which they can then send to their partner school and ask them to complete the same task for their state / country on the same timeline so that they can compare and reflect on the types and frequency of disasters.

Design a rescue vehicle

Encourage your students to draw pictures of a futuristic rescue vehicle that needs to save people from the one sort of natural disaster that occurs in their area/country. Take digital photos of the drawings and exchange them with your partner school.

What would you do?

Ask your students to write about what they'd do in the event of a natural disaster (something that has or can occur in their region) and provide reasons why. They might like to think about who they would save and why.

Surviving a disaster rules

As a Think-Pair-Share collaborative activity ask each student to write down five important rules for surviving a disaster (What I thought). Ask each student to then find out what their partner 'buddy' thinks are five important rules for surviving a disaster (What my partner thought). You might use a Think-Pair-Share template with the two responses and ask the buddies to work together to select the top five rules from their combined list (What we will Share).

Do you know who you're going to call?

Who would your students call in an emergency? What names and phone numbers do they need to have on hand? Ask your partner school the same questions. Look at the different responses and think about how location, culture and background can influence the different responses.

Handout 3

Name:	K.W.L.	Date:
-------	---------------	-------

K What I know already:	W What I want to know:	L What I have learned :