Virtual Exchange Program:
Coming to a Computer Near You?

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Abstract: In the spring of 2000, a “Virtual Exchange Program” was piloted by the Koerber Foundation’s Transatlantic Classroom project. The intent of the program, initiated by the author, was to allow American high school students of German to electronically correspond with Americans of the same age who were in Germany on a one-year, U.S. Congress-Bundestag Exchange Program.

Introduction
Since the medium for the American-to-American correspondence about Germany transpired primarily in English, the rationale for this pilot program was not based upon teaching Americans German. The program sought to introduce an intercultural experience into the foreign language classroom that would directly stimulate and provide for an interest in contemporary German culture.

Findings
American exchange students in Germany corresponded with high school students of German in America (in Bozeman, Montana). Highlights of their correspondence, conducted via an electronic bulletin board, have been archived at:
http://www.tak.schule.de/amvoices.htm

Based upon the author’s five years of experience in American-German K-12 email exchanges, the American exchange students in this pilot program appeared to notice things while in Germany that native students would not notice or would not recognize as worth sharing. This was the general finding of the pilot Virtual Exchange Program, which sought to multiply the positive intercultural learning that takes place when students are able to study and live abroad.

Plans
This spring (2001), the Virtual Exchange Program pilot sponsors would like to expand the program to include more Americans, both at home and abroad. They would also like to begin to build a program for German students of (American) English to electronically correspond with German students on exchange programs in America.

The Virtual Exchange Program, as piloted, may eventually become a comprehensive website that allows students in America and Germany to find “virtual connections” to students on exchange in the target culture. The website would offer both links to information about U.S. states and German Bundeslaender, as well electronic bulletin boards creating electronic access to exchange students in those regions.