Telementoring for Literacy to Cross the Digital Divide

Audrey A. Friedman, Melanie Zibit, and Meca Coote

Walking down the brown and beige hallway, darkened from decades of school, the bell rings at a large urban high school and clamor and talking rise to a pitch as students change classes. We enter the now empty classroom where a veteran teacher introduces herself and excitedly talks about both the possibilities and the frustrations of trying to get workstations set up in her classroom for her struggling low performing students. There are not enough outlets, there is not enough space, and central Boston tech support has to service other schools before anything is done here. Yet the teacher talks with energy and enthusiasm about using telecommunications to link her urban students with Boston College students who will mentor them in writing.

The stimulus for this project comes from work underway at Boston College to infuse technology into the teacher preparation program as well as to foster Boston College’s long standing commitment to the Allston-Brighton schools. The telementoring project is funded by Boston College’s Preparing Tomorrow’s Teachers to Use Technology (PT3 ) Grant and the Massachusetts Coalition for Teacher Quality and Student Achievement, a Title II grant, both from the Department of Education. The project is easily a good fit with the goals of both grants. Telementoring provides a vehicle for preservice teachers to hone skills in the teaching of writing, to establish a mentoring relationship with urban high school students, and to help struggling writers improve writing skills necessary for student achievement. It gives BC student teachers experience teaching writing using technology, provides models of technology use and support for cooperating teachers so that their classrooms can become laboratories for student teachers to teach with technology, and furthers efforts to help BC faculty integrate innovative uses of technology into their instruction. It is hoped that the telementoring project will result in building and sustaining technology use both at Boston College and at Brighton High School thus strengthening student teacher professional development and deepening our collaboration with Brighton High School.

Urban schools traditionally are the least equipped with technology. Teachers usually do not have access to training. And technology support has to stretch across large numbers of schools (Boston has 126) so that big urban districts have to wait for trouble shooting on existing equipment and for new machines. But it is exactly urban students who could benefit most from using technology particularly in writing. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) urges equity of access to computers among students of varying socio-economic
levels and encourages the use of technology in exploring ways to teach English language arts (1983). “Computers in writing instruction may offer the most immediate educational gain to our most marginal students...improved attitudes toward learning in general and writing in particular” (Schwartz, et. al., 1989 p. 145-146). When students use computers in writing, sentence length and complexity increase, revision and editing improve, and thoughtfulness and elaboration deepen (Christy, 1998; Guthrie & Richardson, 1995; Nellen, 1999; Riel, 1995).

What follows is discussion of a frustrating and at times seemingly overwhelming sequence of events. This discussion will chronicle the process we, a technology specialist and researcher, classroom teacher, English methods professor, preservice teachers, and high school students, confronted as we tried to implement technology-based instruction in an urban high school classroom. During this process we attempt to answer several important questions that address the issues of integrating technology into classroom instruction, and particularly urban classrooms. How does research support the integration of technology into the classroom? What are the contexts of the setting and constituents and how do they impact the process of technology integration? What problems, failures, and successes emerge? How does a project of this nature impact preservice teachers, high school students, the classroom teacher, and the university professor? What is the viability of this project as a model of collaboration around teaching, learning, and technology? Was it really worth it?