

# **Public School and University Partnerships: Problems and Possibilities**

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## **Abstract**

*This study examines a university/public school technology partnership intended to aid the public school in technology integration. A description of the partnership process is presented from the point of view of the classroom teachers involved. The paper describes the technology integration project, the role of the public school, and the role of the university. The discussion focuses on ways of making technology partnerships stronger and more useful to both the university and the public school. Communication, support, timing, and training are all keys to a successful technology partnership.*

## **Introduction**

Public school/university partnerships provide an excellent way to introduce technology integration into a classroom. University faculties often have the technical skills and resources necessary for integration, and local public schools provide the setting to put educational theory into practice. Such partnerships may benefit both the university and the public school in several ways. This study looks critically at a university/public school partnership designed to introduce technology integration into two elementary school classrooms. The purpose of the study was to examine the partnership process and to identify the positive aspects of the partnership, as well as those areas needing improving to make future partnerships more successful. The study is descriptive in nature and the results reflect only the experiences of one specific partnership.

## **University and Public School Partnerships**

In an effort to improve our schools, partnerships between colleges of education and public schools are being formed. Such partnerships seem obvious. However, the relationship between universities and public schools has not always worked well.

According to Kagen (1993) there is a difference in how university professors and teachers view the educational process. Kagen further noted, “The implicit political struggle suggested by the two views of teaching will remain unrealized as long as the teachers’ perspective is denigrated by education ‘scholars’ and excluded from the professional literature of teaching, which is virtually monopolized by education professors” (Kagen, 1993, p. 21). Rakow and Robinson (1997) described the relationship as a “dichotomy between the ‘ivory tower’ of the university and the ‘trenches’ of the public school” (p. 64) and suggested that until recently there have been few successful university/public school partnerships.

This is not to suggest that there are no successful partnerships between universities and public schools, but rather to note the need for careful planning when forging these relationships. Dodge (1993) reported that successful partnerships are well planned and provide adequate resources for all activities; in addition, a mutual respect is systematically fostered. A collaborative effort between Virginia Tech and Falls Church City Public Schools suggested that matching complementary resources and talents is essential to successful partnerships (Fray & McClellan, 1998).

The emergence of computers and the Internet as an integral part of schooling provides a natural subject for university/public school partnerships. Many public schools need help integrating technology into the classroom and partnerships can be a useful method of achieving this goal. There are beneficial technology projects between universities and public schools; one such project is between Kansas State University and Spring Hill (Kansas) Unified School District. The partnership resulted in a seven-step model that clarifies information literacy and its relationship to the Internet (Baily & Lumley, 1999). Another successful project is The Texas A&M Institute for School-University Partnerships (*Institute for school-university partnerships*). Among other projects, The Texas A&M partnership offers fellowships in Technology Based Instruction designed to create web-based video units that to assist teachers throughout Texas.

A different type of partnership that directly involved teachers was the Chicago Public Schools and The University of Chicago partnership (Wisniewski, 1999). The project’s goal was to use technology to augment the curriculum. To this end, The University of Chicago provided infrastructure, teacher training, system support, and

development of curriculum resources. Work was conducted directly with teachers and principals by offering training in basic computer skills, but also in more refined skills such as creating teaching modules using Internet resources. In addition, the university partner trained a small group of teachers to conduct their own training programs. It is important to note that this program offered support for teachers by giving them the tools of technology and aiding them in developing curriculum integration ideas, rather than imposing a curriculum upon them (Wisniewski, 1999).

Michael Orey, a professor at The University of Georgia, partnered with a local middle school for four years. During that time, Orey learned a great deal about integrating computers into schools and successfully integrating technology into the curriculum. Orey (2000) provided many suggestions for successful partnerships; among them are having frank discussions with the faculty concerning the partner's role in the school, supporting teachers as they try to implement project-based ideas, giving teachers time to become comfortable with the new teaching methodology, and finally, developing a relationship based on trust with both teachers and administrators.

Another model designed to make use of computers and multimedia tools involved a collaboration of a team of educators that included university professors, classroom teachers, and pre-service teachers. Together the team developed and implemented science units based on the whole language approach that included a technology component. The successful project demonstrated new educational methods to the classroom teachers and provided needed teaching experience to the pre-service teacher (Balajthy, 1991).

Fullan (1993) believed that colleges of education and public schools should work closely together and that collaboration is beneficial to both parties. Rakow and Robinson (1997) agreed:

Developing a collaboration between public schools and universities is like building a house. The foundation must be well laid, level, and firmly seated before construction begins above. If materials are shoddy or constructed of poor quality, the structure will not be able to withstand storms. Each beam needs to be capable of carrying its weight, and it is the combined strength of all the pieces that gives the structure its integrity. But even the best-constructed house, if not maintained, will soon fall into disrepair (p. 69).

## **Purpose and Method**

This study involved a major public university in the southeast and two classes in a local public elementary school. The elementary school is a Professional Development School (PDS) in partnership with the university and has approximately 440 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. There are 25 homeroom classes and a total faculty of 47. Approximately 89% of the students receive free or reduced lunch. Information was gathered through a series of interviews conducted with the classroom teachers throughout the semester.

A PDS partnership has three functions: to develop and conduct research, to provide in-service opportunities, and to provide a setting for pre-service education. The ultimate goal of a PDS partnership is to increase student achievement and learning (Shaver, 2000). The project under study by this research, the More Observations of Nature Project, or the MOON Project, is one of many collaborative ventures between the university and the local public schools. In turn, The MOON Project is part of a larger project developed at Ball State University, which originally paired pre-service science education students at Ball State with Native American students in New Mexico for the purpose of increasing cultural awareness. (*Program uses moon*, 2001).

Locally the MOON Project involved two classes (one fourth grade and one fifth grade) in which elementary students were to view and record the phases of the moon each evening. Students would then describe the phases they saw with “research buddies,” elementary students from around the country and Australia. Through electronic chat and video conferences the students would come to realize the differences in the moon’s appearance in other parts of the world.

From the point of view of the university, the MOON Project would introduce technologies new to the public school in a manner that focused on teaching teachers how to integrate technologies into the learning environment. Both classroom teachers reported that they did not, on a regular basis, integrate technology into the curriculum. Their students were familiar with computers through programs such as Accelerated Reader™, but had not taken the step to true technology integration. The teachers were interviewed at various points during one semester of the project to assess how the technology partnership was being introduced and implemented between the university and elementary school faculty.

Unexpected delays hindered the start of the project for the local school. The school originally selected for the project announced its closing, and the MOON Project's program coordinator left the university. As a result the grant that funded the project had to be rewritten to facilitate the changes. Although both of these issues were resolved, it caused unanticipated setbacks for the project.

### **Results**

The initial meeting with the teachers from the elementary school took place soon after the school year began. The teachers reported some confusion regarding the project. Although they had received e-mail from the MOON Project director, the e-mail was lost among the heavy volume of e-mail teachers received at the beginning of the school year. The teachers knew about the project, but the details were unclear. They understood that they were to have their students look at the moon each evening. The teachers also understood that the students would "chat" with students from other parts of the country and world about what they had seen. The teachers discussed between themselves their interpretations of their project's role. They commented that it was difficult to motivate the students, as they could not fully relate the project's details to their students.

At another meeting, two weeks later, the teachers were still uncertain about the project. They had been promised a SMART Board™ (an interactive white board attached to a computer and projector) and an eyeball camera for videoconferences with other schools. The equipment had not yet been delivered from the university. The chat sessions had not been set up and the project seemed to be lagging. The teachers had regular meetings with the university professors, but until the SMART Board™ arrived and the chat rooms were set up, there was little to do. Again the teachers reported that the students were not particularly motivated to view the phases of the moon.

A week later, the project began moving in a positive direction. The project coordinator from the university met with the teachers and taught them how to access the project website and to set up the chat rooms for the project. The project coordinator also created a web page with digital pictures taken each night of the moon phases. Because of this instruction, the teachers became excited about the prospect of the chat room and the web page. A discussion ensued concerning a web page that would be created by the

teachers (with instruction) for their classes that would be linked to the moon-phases page created by the project coordinator.

Subsequent meetings were all positive. The students were “chatting” with other classes in the country, and frequently students were teaching other students this process. The SMART Board™ arrived and the teachers received training in its use. A technology resource person from the school district helped the teachers create their own web page, which linked to the moon phase page that had been previously created. The teachers reported that “chatting” with others schools and students motivated the students and created greater interest in the project. The teachers begin developing lesson plans utilizing both the moon project and the new technologies they were introduced to, thus truly integrating technology into the curriculum.

### **Discussion**

Contrary to the findings of Kagen (1993) and Rakow and Robinson (1997), there seemed to be no philosophical controversy between the university and the public school. Both seemed pleased with the project and its results. Although the project began slowly, the partnership was certainly positive. Both students and teachers were motivated to learn new technologies, and both teachers described the project as worthwhile and constructive. The teachers benefited from working directly with the university partners on both the technical and curricular aspects of the project, which supports the findings of Wisniewski (1999).

The teachers suggested several ways of improving the project. In agreement with the findings of Dodge (1993), communication is one such area. While the teachers had met with the university partners and their school administrator concerning the project, all had not met together, which caused initial miscommunication. In addition, the teachers were under the impression that the SMART Board™ would be kept in one of their two classrooms for their use at any time. However, the SMART Board™ is housed with other audio-visual equipment and must be checked out by the teachers.

Timing was another problem. The project began at the beginning of the school year, which is not an ideal time for teachers. The teachers reported the difficulty of beginning a project at the same time as trying to get to know their students and beginning the school year. In regard to the use of technology, all technology used in the project

should be in place before the project begins and the teachers should be properly trained in their use to ensure a successful project (Wisniewski, 1999).

It is important to note that this project lagged until the project coordinator's assessment determined the necessity to intercede with the plan previously put in motion. At this point teachers were given the necessary instruction making them comfortable with the technology and capable of integrating this technology into the classroom, again supporting the findings of Wisniewski (1999).

Technology partnerships are significant because technology integration is becoming fundamental to education. Integrating technology in the curriculum motivates students and results in more project-based learning (Wisniewski, 1999). The MOON Project reflects this view. In addition, the project characterizes the goals set out for a Professional Development School of providing in-service training and providing a setting for professional research (Shaver, 2000). The continued relationship between the university and the public schools creates the trust necessary for successful partnerships (Orey, 2000). Further research should be conducted to determine the most effective method of conducting partnerships to ensure the continued improvement of university/public school partnerships; however, all agree that partnerships are beneficial to both parties.

### **Contributors**

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