

Building Digital Bridges to Global Understanding:
Research Findings on the 2004 EE-PALS Project Informs the 2005 Project

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Abstract: The EE-PALS team returns to report findings from their Digital Bridges to Global Understanding EE-PALS project that was implemented in 2004 and reported on at the SITE 2005 conference. In addition to data findings, the newly revised EE-PALS 2005 will be shared along with preliminary finding from that project. Technology has the potential to connect countries and cultures but is not without special problems that require creative solutions to overcome the digital divide. Insights shared into how to successfully construct a fail-safe digital bridge that enables the people to people connection is important information for all educators.

The EE-PALS project undertaken last year to connect American middle school teachers with their counterparts in Russia found initial efforts to pair over-extended American teachers with technology challenged Russian teachers to be more difficult than anticipated. While American teachers expressed initial enthusiasm for the project, for the most part they were slow to engage their Russian counterparts. The Russian teachers were eager to participate, but became frustrated when they used their personal email programs to correspond with their American counterparts and found that often their emails could not get through. Larger American school systems block correspondence from most Russian email addresses, marking them as spam. Frustration could be felt on both sides of the Atlantic because teachers often believed their personal emails were left unanswered.

All was not lost, however, and some teams regularly corresponded, offering a real up close and personal look at these different cultures. We found both groups of children, Russian and American, to be interested in exchanging information about family, school and free time activities. Students completing both the pre and post surveys grew in cultural awareness and appreciation of one another. Both answered pre-project surveys with the usual stereotypes: Russians are rural, secretive and hard-working. Americans have many advantages, are loud and pushy, and they, too, are hard-working.

Post survey results indicated that both groups came to understand how their interests and core values were the same. Both wanted peace for their countries and an understanding of other cultures and other parts of the world. American children expressed an interest in visiting Russia for a first hand look at Mother Russia, the home of their EE-PALS.

EE-PALS 2005, has sought to address the problems of our first effort so that now there are fail-safe opportunities for a greater number of teachers and students to successfully participate. Teachers participating in 2005 are required to strictly adhere to the email messaging practice and email only through the server secure site. This system insures that emails coming from Russia will not be marked as spam. In addition, a visit was made to St. Petersburg, Russia, by the EE-PALS research team to meet and enlist as participants the teachers and students at School 295. Researchers determined the school computer capabilities, and worked with master teachers to overview the EE-PALS emailing system, initiate surveys among a group of advanced English students, and determine who would lead the Russian team in this school. Galina Skoblikova, a longtime School 295 teacher and international educator, was selected. Dr. Kathy Godfrey, a member of the EE-PALS research team and Assistant Principal at Harris Creek Elementary School in Raleigh, North Carolina, will head up the school based American team. The NC State research team left with names of Russian students who wanted to participate and hard copy correspondence of the Russian children's first contact. Dr. Godfrey will institute and lead an EE-PALS Club at her school, thus insuring that pre and post surveys are given and correspondence will be steady and constant. Galina Skoblikova will do the same at School 295.

To help American students and teachers follow the research team as they visited Russia to set up EE-PALS 2005, an EE-PALS blog was established. (<http://eepals.blogspot.com>) The blog kept the followers of the trip and project on both sides of the Atlantic informed of the daily study tours and school visits made by the team. Many following the blog were EE-PALS 2004 and Russia NC6 participants. (www.ncsu.edu/chass/extension/russia-nc6) 1 Followers were able to log on and post comments and ask questions along side this "digital blogging bridge." 2

Today the need for digital bridges to build global understanding is greater than ever. 3 The teaching of social studies has been replaced by extra doses of literacy and math to satisfy America's testing craze. School's budgets, stretched tight to cover the cost of testing, are buying fewer social studies textbooks. EE-PALS 2004 enabled us to listen to the children and when we did we found that they have an interest in becoming more aware of others around the globe. They also desired to work together virtually on joint projects that foster cultural cooperation. 4 Their concern for our planet and its peoples is great. EE-PALS 2005 seeks to build on EE-PALS 2004 by establishing solid, permanent links to enable virtual student exchanges and projects that promote global awareness and understanding of and for all peoples. 5

Notes:

1. Candy Beal, Pru Cuper, Pat Dalton, "The Russia Project: Building Digital Bridges and Meeting Adolescent Needs," *International Journal of Social Education* 19 no.2, (Fall/Winter 2004-2005): 1-19.
2. James Beane, *Curriculum Integration: Designing the Core of Democratic Education* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1997).
3. Candy Beal, Pru Cuper, Pat Dalton, "The Russia Project: Building Digital Bridges and Meeting Adolescent Needs," *International Journal of Social Education* 19 no.2, (Fall/Winter 2004-2005): x.
4. Jane Steelman, Lisa Grable, Ellen Vasu, "Expanding Global Awareness: The Use of Student-Developed Multimedia Created in a Cooperative Learning Environment," *International Journal of Social Education* 19 no.2, (Fall/Winter 2004-2005): 41-50.
5. Amanda Robertson, "Process-Oriented Design: Conversational Interfaces for Global Accessibility," *International Journal of Social Education* 19 no.2, (Fall/Winter 2004-2005): 61-69.