

ON THE NET Tele-Collaborative Projects: Monsters.com?

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Collaborative projects are a natural for the language class because all language is fundamentally communicative and collaboration requires real communication to work. By creating an environment in which students want to communicate in a creative manner about something that is personally interesting to them, we can encourage writing in which the students' true goal is to get an idea across rather than just to complete the assignment (Hadley, 2001; Shrum & Glisan, 2000). In this column we examine a project that brought together elementary and middle school students in France and Canada as well as a Basque school to communicate about a topic of concern to any child who has heard a fairy tale or watched a Disney movie, MONSTERS! It is hoped that other teachers may use this project as a model for similar collaborative efforts, and to this end we mention several other useful tools as well.



Dessinez-moi un Monstre! (Draw me a Monster!) is a collaborative project coordinated by Jane Scaplen of Sacred Heart Elementary School, Marystown, Terre-Neuve, Canada. Students of French in grades 3 to 8 from over 20 different schools participated in writing about their invented monsters, sharing their descriptions, and drawing each other's creations. An innovative aspect of this project is the use of the Internet as the medium for interaction, allowing more students to participate and so reap the benefits of the communication while at the same time motivating the participants by providing a larger audience with whom to share their work. Students thus have the excitement of knowing that their descriptions will come alive at the hands of someone who has carefully read their work for its content and in order to actually do something with it. In addition, this person may live in a different part of the world. In this way, the activity brings together the interdisciplinary components of language, art, and technology.

The site for the project is divided into three sections:



These include a detailed explanation of the projet and instructions for teachers and students, a listing of the participating schools, and the children's work, both descriptions and drawings.

The Project

The project is set up to take place over a period of a little more than 3 months with specific dates for registering as a participant, sending in the texts and drawings, and comparing the descriptions and one's own work with the original concept of the monster's creator and receiving a certificate of participation.

The description of the project clearly sets forth the activities of the participants so that the children and teachers know exactly what is expected of them and what will happen throughout the course of the activity:

Les participants écrivent des descriptions et font des dessins de monstres. Ils nous envoient ensuite les descriptions pour être préparées et affichées sur une page Web. Les descriptions seront aussi envoyées à chaque participant. Personne ne va voir les vrais dessins jusqu'à la fin du projet. Pendant la période du 7 avril au 25 avril, les participants seront invités à essayer à dessiner des monstres d'autres participants selon les descriptions fournies. À la fin, les dessins originaux seront affichés.

Each participating student writes a description and provides a drawing of a monster. The coordinator resends these descriptions to all participants via e-mail and also places them on the Web where everyone can read them and try his or her hand at drawing the monster to fit the description. At the end of the project, the original drawing by the monster's creator is distributed to all and also placed on the page so that all of the students can compare their drawings to the original. To accommodate individual needs, there is also flexibility in the level of participation for a class that might not have time to devote to the entire range of project activities:

Une classe peut décider de participer à plusieurs niveaux:

- 1.) lire les descriptions et faire des dessins de monstres,*
- 2.) écrire des descriptions des monstres ou,*
- 3.) décrire ses propres monstres et dessiner aussi les monstres des autres.*

A participating class can create original descriptions and drawings, they can read and draw the monsters of others, or they can do both. If preparing the descriptions, it is the students' writing skills that are practiced. When producing drawings to fit the descriptions, it is primarily the reading skills. And for those who participate in all activities, of course, it is both. Descriptions include information about the monster's appearance, habitat, food, and pastimes, thus touching on key topics in the typical foreign language class syllabus.

Participants

As a first step in the process of joining this project, each class provides information about the school, the class, and their community. This information is displayed on the project site and introduces each group to the students from other participating classes.



Sharing information in this way helps to establish a sense of community with the other schools, and responses to queries such as "Describe what you see out your window" help strengthen the children's awareness that the others are real people, like themselves. This clearer idea of the audience can only help make students better writers.

Monsters

The Monsters on the project page are arranged by school, for example, under Sacred Heart, 6th grade, we find the description and drawing of Fruzzzy par Meghan (<http://www.k12.nf.ca/she/jscaplen/monstres/textes/fruzzy.html>):

Mon monstre a un oeil hideux, trois nez et une grande bouche. Sa tête est plus grande que son corps. Des poils couvrent presque tout son corps. Fruzzzy a trois jambes mais une jambe est plus petite que les autres. Il a six bras mais juste quatre mains. Chaque main a dix-sept doigts et trois pouces. Il porte une lunette presque douze fois plus grande que son oeil. Fruzzzy porte un chapeau très grand mais il ne porte pas de vêtements.

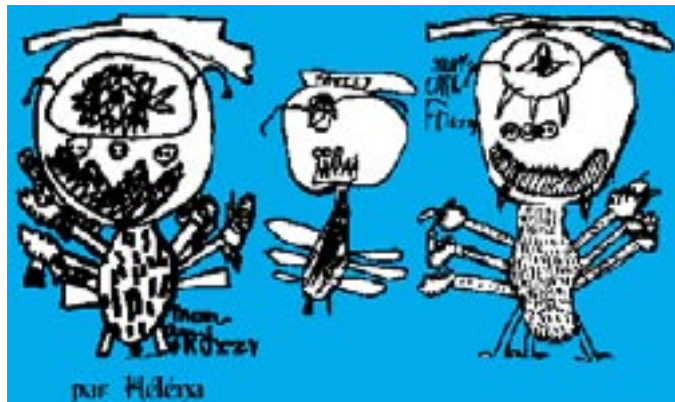
Fruzzzy aime manger des fruits et des carottes et il aime boire du lait. Il aime lire des livres à propos de l'amour et des livres drôles. Fruzzzy habite dans mon armoire. Fruzzzy et moi jouons toujours ensemble. On joue au ballon-volant chaque fois qu'il fait soleil dehors. Il est mon ami.

[My monster has a hideous eye, three noses, and a big mouth. His head is bigger than his body. Fur covers almost all of his body. Fruzzzy has three legs, but one leg is shorter than the others. He has six arms but only four hands. Each hand has seventeen fingers and three thumbs. He wears an eyeglass that is nearly twelve times bigger than his eye. Fruzzzy wears a very big hat, but he doesn't wear any clothes.

Fruzzzy likes to eat fruit and carrots, and he likes to drink milk. He likes to read books about love and funny books. Fruzzzy lives in a closet. Fruzzzy and I always play together. We play volleyball whenever the sun is shining outside. He's my friend.]



Along with this image, we also find drawings by students from another school:



Throughout the site, the presentation is clear and consistent, making it an easy site for children to navigate.

Doing Similar Projects

Improved compatibility among software for images and word-processing makes this project much more manageable than it might have been even 10 years ago. The students' art work can be created either on a computer or by hand and then scanned to provide an image that may be easily sent through e-mail. Word-processing provides somewhat similar facility of exchange. Though proprietary formats are different, most programs are able to read the formats generated by other software. By having each participating student or teacher produce the electronic texts and images, the coordinator's role is not as overwhelming as it would be if she also had to manipulate and scan all these hard copy documents herself or send and receive materials through the regular mail, especially to other countries. In addition, students who do the word processing, digital drawing or scanning themselves are also learning useful technical skills that will serve them later.

As described, the *Dessinez-moi un Monstre!* project needs a coordinator who is at ease handling e-mail attachments and setting up an e-mail distribution list, who can create and maintain a simple Web site, and who knows how to provide clear instructions to another teacher for using e-mail attachments on the other end. These other participating teachers do not need technology skills beyond basic e-mail, managing files and e-mail attachments, word processing, and image scanning.

Other teachers wishing to use this project as a model could certainly follow its guidelines to the letter as they are very clear and well thought out. Depending on the skills of the teachers involved, it would likely be possible to run a similar project without the step of email redistribution of the text and images so that all teachers and/or their students access these documents through the Web rather than through e-mail. This would require that participating teachers have or develop minimal skills in using a Web browser in addition to using e-mail, but it would simplify this stage of the project for the coordinator. Teachers would only need to be notified by the coordinator that the Web documents were available online.

Participating students do not necessarily need access to the computer for reading descriptions, drawing their own version of the monsters, and comparing them to the originals as this can be done using printed copies created by the teacher from the web or email attachment on a color printer. This means that having a computer in the classroom is not even a necessity for this aspect of the activity.









At the other end of the spectrum of technological acumen, it is also interesting to share the readers' versions of the monster's image through the Internet so the creator, and perhaps other children, would see how others have interpreted his or her monster. Depending on how it is done, this could require a higher level of technical skill on the part of a participating teacher who might wish to create a Web page for that class as well in order to share all of the drawings. In the *Dessinez-moi un Monstre!* site we often see one such "response" drawing with a description, but it could also be possible to place all of these images on the same site, linked to the description. This, of course, would involve additional work for the coordinator. A third option could be to e-mail all of these images directly to the original creator of each monster. As always, the possibilities are limited only by our imaginations. Of course, along these lines, the descriptions and drawings could represent any topic that might be of interest to the students. Monsters are not the only way to go ;-)

Inspirations: Finding Other Examples

The "Monsters" project serves as a wonderful example of a telecollaborative project, and there are other sites on the net that can serve as inspirations for the foreign language (FL) educator who wishes to undertake such a task. To find such projects on the net, try using your preferred search engine (for example, [Google.com](http://www.google.com)) and entering the words "collaborative projects" or "collaborative educational projects" in whatever target language (TL) you teach. Then explore the search results to locate a myriad of telecollaborative projects that are ongoing all around the world.

Some of these will be country-specific and may address national curricular goals. As such, they preclude inscription by participants other than those in the particular educational system, but these projects still serve as valuable examples of what is possible. They can also be an excellent resource for authentic materials that you can incorporate into your own activities. In addition, these educational projects typically cross content areas and thus are quite useful for addressing the Connections goal area of the national Standards for Foreign Language Learning (Standards, 1996).

The 2002-2003 cycle of [Proyectos educativos](#) of the [RedEscolar](#) of [ILCE](#) (Instituto Latinoamericano de la Comunicación Educativa) in Mexico demonstrates this attention to connections as its projects cover at least eight different content areas:

	Lectura		Ciencias naturales		Geografía		Historia
	Formación cívica y ética		Educación artística		Educación física		Curículos de aprendizaje

Each content area contains several projects that are outlined with rationale, objectives, instructor's guidelines, inscription procedures, and calendar of activities. The grade levels for these projects and concomitant activities range from second grade through high school. Obviously, the language level of the TL learners must be taken into consideration when constructing tasks using authentic materials. Because the projects here represent a wide range of native speaker educational levels, teachers have a good variety of texts and resources from which to choose when developing activities for their own TL students.



A final example is provided by the [KIDLINK](#) site, which states its goal as Preparing Kids for Life: to give youth better control over their lives, help them mature, get friends, create social networks, and collaborate with peers around the world individually or through their classrooms.

Kidlink has an archive of projects in eleven different [content areas](#) and [18 different languages](#). Many of the projects undertaken through the Kidlink site truly exemplify all the FL Standards goals of *Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities*. The site is very user-friendly and has directions for use, projects and activities, and instructions for registration. There are even suggestions for finding another class to share in a joint project.

When setting up your own tele-collaborative project, you can also find potential participating teachers through email discussion lists for FL teachers such as [FLTEACH](#). With thousands of subscribers from around the world, the list is likely to put you in touch with some teachers with whom your own project strikes a chord, and a number of teachers report having found long-term, dependable partners in this way. Subscribers are invited to fill out a request for biographical information that includes interests and projects. This information is then incorporated into a searchable [biography database](#) so that FL teachers can make professional connections to plan joint projects.

Collaborative projects are, indeed, a natural segue from regular FL class activities that are designed to foment language learning. Communicating with others is the basic goal of language, and doing so in a real-life context underscores the reality and usefulness of the subject we teach. The projects delineated

above are excellent examples of this endeavor and offer an interesting alternative to FL teachers searching for additional ways to bring the world into the classroom.

REFERENCES

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