



## Bridging Traditional Culture with ICT Education

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### Abstract

*To promote ICT-naïve teachers and students, to introduce the idea, develop the desire, and reduce the resistance to expansion of ICT use within an educational environment with currently limited internet connectivity and lack of computers, we developed a school connectivity program [1] through Project Harmony in Armenia. For English language acquisition, we conducted virtual connectivity sessions between Armenian and American high school students, including various projects and activities. Our ICT-experienced students then bridged familiar traditional culture with new online learning experiences and virtual connectivity in “student-to-student” discussions with ICT-naïve students and teachers, focusing on differences and similarities between American and Armenian cultures. These discussions were “hosted” by culturally traditional Armenian puppets (puppetry is a serious art form in Armenia) manipulated by our ICT-experienced students to introduce and garner support for ICT interactive teaching-learning.*

Acceptance of concepts and applications of information communication technology (ICT) for education is often very difficult in ICT-naïve schools for both teachers and students. This is especially common in schools located in rural and isolated regions in developing countries as well as in low socioeconomic areas in developed countries. The barriers to acceptance of ICT include absence of understanding how ICT can be applied to education, lack of confidence of both teachers and students, inexperience, no motivation, limited access to resources, and unreliability of equipment and classroom practices. Lack of ICT-enabled learning leads to a digital divide between developed and developing countries as well as regions within the same country, further enhancing the socio-economic lag in these areas. Often, when an environment of enthusiasm and understanding of educational ICT application is not established before the introduction of ICT into the classroom, the introduction fails to thrive. In Armenia, a transitional post-Soviet Union country, we used a “glocalization strategy”, integrating local traditions and culture with global ICT, to introduce, promote and inspire acceptance and enthusiasm among teachers and students for ICT. This “inside-out” approach [1] assesses cultural and traditional assets and strengths locally to help bridge the gap for preparing a school for ICT integration. There were two phases of the project. The first phase involved working collaboratively with Project Harmony with my students in my classroom on a language acquisition ICT project. The second phase was a separate collaborative effort between myself and my ICT-experienced students to develop a local traditional culturally-integrated bridging of ICT to the other ICT-naïve teachers, students and parents. This last phase was especially challenging, given the mistrust, ill - feelings and misconceptions of ICT displayed by the community. The first phase included a donation by Project Harmony of five computers with necessary software and limited internet connectivity to support the development of social ICT learning between American students and ten of my 6th grade Armenian students. Internet communications were established between two classrooms on opposite sides of the world to improve language skills and to promote learning through cultural exchange. As the teacher I became a facilitator, with the process being student-centered and peer-learning. My students got rich learning experiences not only in terms of ICT but also, due to the inter-cultural exchanges, linguistic skills and cultural knowledge. Given the current limited equipment and opportunities for ICT connection, it was crucial first to garner support from the skeptical and less-than-supportive ICT-naïve teachers, students and parents in the rest of the school. To address this issue, I facilitated a project collaboratively with my ten ICT-experienced students to develop a social marketing project for the ICT-naïve teachers, students and their families, which included the entire school. First, I led a discussion with my students on the importance of sharing their new experiences and knowledge with others and introduced the training-of-trainers model to them. We had five group meetings where we developed the event, prepared materials, and decided on other students to be included. As a group, we decided on a traditional/cultural bridging program to garner support from the rest of the school, given the context of the school community. At the beginning of the event for the ICT-naïve teachers, students and their families, we invited other students to perform familiar



traditional dance and music which provided a comfortable ambience for the school community and enhanced their openness to support and accept ICT in the school. My students designed a wall poster which was digitized and integrated into a digital PowerPoint presentation to share the knowledge and experience they gained with their peers. The wall poster was named “The Bridge of Friendship” to illustrate the connection between the Armenian and the American students. On the top of the wall poster, they drew a train with four wagons on a bridge which they placed photographs. The first photograph illustrated the process of telecommunication in the computer lab with some teachers watching. The second photograph showed my students and me in front of the national opera house with a famous Armenian musician, to demonstrate cultural heritage. In the third photograph, we were with a famous Armenian painter and his paintings. The fourth showed puppets performing the “Round Dance of Unity” around Mt. Ararat, an important symbol of Armenia. Between the columns supporting the bridge in the poster, students placed texts that explained the differences and similarities between Armenian and American cultures and the importance of English language acquisition, most effectively learned through ICT. In the middle of the poster was a notebook computer in which was a photograph of their new penpals in America. A mix of both cultural and ICT was used to produce the wall poster photographed for display in the PowerPoint presentation. Watercolor was used in a noted traditional way to paint the bridge and computer technologies were used to vividly produce text and photographs. The concept of the wall poster was to “bridge” the old and familiar with the new for the uninitiated. Other PowerPoint slides included photographs sent to the new penpals in the U.S. that included traditional weddings, museum trips, national minorities, and demonstrations, emphasizing what the students gained from the ICT interaction with students in the U.S. Central to the message of the importance of ICT in language and cultural learning and exchange, a culturally traditional puppet show, which included development of a script, replicated ICT exchanges that had occurred over the internet between the American and the Armenian students. Puppetry is a serious dynamic art form in Armenia that appeals to all age groups. The puppets were handmade by my students with the puppet masters being three of my students. One represented an American student and one an Armenian student, with verbal exchanges in English language between them representing exchanges that had occurred over the internet. The third puppet translated the other two into Armenian language for the audience. Projected behind the puppets was the internet chat site that was actually used for the school connectivity program [2]. The lively “interactive” debate between the puppets explained American culture, using humor to share their understanding and to connect with the rest of the school community

At the conclusion of the event, we evaluated the program by asking the ICT-naïve students to honestly respond to their interest to use and learn through ICT in the school. We had outlined a flower with petals and the students who considered the project valuable and effective and wanted to participate in ICT learning were to place a dot in the center of the flower. If they thought it was useful but didn't want to participate then would put their dot in the petals surrounding the center. If they didn't see ICT useful, they would put their dot outside of the petals. The large majority of students wanted to have ICT-supported education and wished to participate. This event also corrected many misconceptions and resolved resistance by many teachers and parents. The marriage of tradition and culture with ICT in this event opened the door and enthusiastic acceptance of future computer-based education.

Building on the traditional and cultural Armenian values held by teachers, students and parents opened their minds to accept and support new foreign ICT in language and cultural education, sharing with them the importance of a new visions and experiences of outside cultures and language. It is important to build a foundation of enthusiastic support to introduce and successfully sustain ICT education in schools where ICT is new. This approach has applicability in other countries and societies with schools where ICT has not made inroads and where resistance to change is inevitable.

## References

- [1] Journal of Research in Rural Education, Spring, 2001, Vol. 17, No.1, 12-26
- [2] Armenian School Connectivity program website: <http://ascp.ph-int.org/en/partnership.php>.