

This Island We Live On
Executive Summary

August 1999

The 'North South Project' used Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to link student teachers, teachers and pupils in post primary schools in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The aims of these links were to:

- Increase ICT competence in schools
- Foster collaboration and mutual understanding on both sides of the Border
- Produce curricular resources through collaborative school projects

The Project ran from September 1998 to June 1999. It was implemented by student teachers and teachers working in conjunction with Department of Education at NUI Maynooth and the School of Education at the University of Ulster. Communication during the project was effected mainly by computer conferencing and videoconferencing. The collaboration produced a total of 12 projects covering 7 areas of the schools' curriculum presented on a website. A total of 60 student teachers, 26 teachers and approximately 300 pupils aged between 13-17 years took part in the overall Project.

This summative report consists of 4 parts:

Part 1 Rationale of the Project - The wider context

1.1 Keeping pace with the Information Society is an essential element of government education policy in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The Schools IT2000 policy framework document from the Department of Education and Science in the Republic of Ireland underlines the necessity of equipping all learners with computer skills. The Strategy for Education Technology from the Department of Education in Northern Ireland similarly emphasises the importance of ICT. The North-South Project fits into these strategic ICT goals.

1.2 Recent political developments encourage North South co-operation in education. The most recent White Paper on Education (1995) in the Republic encourages cross-border links both at school level and within the third level sector. In "A New Framework for Agreement" (1995) the British and Irish Governments made specific reference to the potential for harmonising certain areas of activity such as education. The North South Project endeavours to play its part in such harmonising.

1.3 Collaborative learning using ICT has educational value. Research has shown that the use of ICT can support a collaborative learning community, where learners are interacting with group members, both local and remote, sharing knowledge, clarifying their thinking, engaging in a process of reflection and thereby developing valuable higher order critical thinking skills.

Part 2 The Project in Practice

2.1 The first phase of the Project, which ran from September to November 1998, involved linking student teachers at NUI Maynooth with their counterparts in the University of Ulster, using computer conferencing. During this period, 60 student teachers engaged in weekly conferences, sharing ideas on topics related to their Initial Teacher Training programme. The report includes choice of conferencing software, objectives and organisation of conferences, lessons learned and recommendations. The report finds that initial absorption by the technology is replaced by successful discussions based on structured themes.

2.2 The second phase of the Project ran from January 1999 to June 1999. The focus now moved from student teachers communicating with each other to student teachers and teachers working with pupils in the classroom. A group of 20 student teachers and 26 teachers worked with a total of 297 pupils.

- A meeting of student teachers, teachers and Project staff from both universities took place in February 1999 in Belfast. The planning of phase 2 was the main item on the agenda. This involved a small number of schools, seven in Northern Ireland and six in the Republic of Ireland. Teachers agreed that most of the communication should take place through computer conferencing and videoconferencing. This collaboration led to a range of cross-border projects based on the theme of "This Island we live on". The report explains the selection process of schools for the Project. It also details the ICT equipment used and the rationale for the choice of software. It outlines the training involved and gives a detailed account of the planning of curricular based school projects. The report also describes the use of videoconferencing and computer conferencing- this includes practical guidelines for effective videoconferencing.
- A second planning meeting took place in Maynooth in April. The report includes evaluation of progress at this stage. It highlights the main issues and recommendations for the remainder of phase 2 of the Project up to June 1999. Integrating project work into the curriculum and encouraging more collaborative work were areas that were identified at this stage as needing more consideration. The report describes different models of collaborative learning at a distance, which were recommended for the Project.

2.3 Examination of school projects prepared for the website

The culmination of this collaboration is the publication of projects on the website. The report examines the completed projects as teaching and learning resources. Included is a brief description of some of the work done in preparation for school projects appearing on the website. Some of the projects are summarised and the value of these projects is outlined.

Part 3 *The impact of the Project.*

This is divided into four sections:

3.1 Impact on student teachers is evaluated under the headings:

- Acquisition of ICT skills
- Relevance of project to the curriculum
- Importance of cultural awareness
- The use of ICT as a motivating factor in class
- Role of Web Crossing for support of student teachers
- Problems encountered

3.2 Impact on teachers is evaluated from the following perspectives:

- Teacher confidence in the use of ICT
- Challenges to the use of ICT in school
- Suggestions for improvement
- Examples of success in integrating ICT into teaching
- Have teachers' attitudes to the use of ICT in the classroom changed?

3.3 Impact on pupils was examined under the following headings:

- learning ICT skills
- Greater knowledge of subject
- Cultural awareness
- Social benefit

3.4 Impact on schools is examined from the following perspectives:

- Commitment of school principal to Project
- Whole school awareness of the Project
- General benefits to the school of the Project
- Link between school and universities

Part 4 Conclusions and Recommendations

Participants in this project experienced in varying degrees, new ideas, new perspectives on subject matter, new methods in time management, new experiences with communications technology.

4.1 The report concludes that ICT has a role to play in the promotion of mutual understanding.

4.2 ICT should be incorporated as an everyday learning tool in schools.

Projects such as North South can engage pupils' use of multiple intelligence.

4.3 As a source of information for the wider educational community - the report concludes that the North South website has much to offer in terms of guidelines for best practice using ICT for collaboration, educational resources and the opportunity for increasing cultural awareness.

4.4 Considerations for Future Development of the Project

The report considers the importance and implications of the following:

- Variety of perspectives
- Role of ICT Co-ordinator
- Number of Projects per School
- Enthusiasm of schools
- Further training of teachers in ICT

4.5 Recommendations

The report concludes with a list of recommendations including better ICT facilities in schools, more pupil involvement, more frequent communication, increased training of teachers in the use of ICT and more realistic targets for projects.