

# Crossing Borders and Building Bridges Using the Internet

C. Frederick Risinger

**First, an introductory remark:** On Sunday, September 9, I was interviewed on National Public Radio's *Weekend Edition Sunday* by Liane Hansen on what textbooks say about the 9/11 attacks and about the war in Iraq. I broadened the topic to include the rise and expansion of Islam, the Crusades, and the establishment of Israel. The interview only lasts about five to six minutes, and can be accessed at [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14272735](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14272735) (click on the "Listen" button).

I mention the interview because it is relevant to the focus of this issue's column. I've been reading the latest book by Howard Gardner, the Harvard professor who changed K-12 education with his 1983 book, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. His new book is titled *Five Minds for the Future* (2006). In it, he defines the five cognitive abilities that all humans will need to meet the challenges of globalization, advances in science and technology, and the clash of civilizations. One of his five "minds" is "the respectful mind," awareness of and appreciation for differences among other peoples and other cultures.

While I was reading the book, the NCSS Annual Conference Preview arrived. I love the theme: "Crossing Borders, Building Bridges." As NCSS President Gayle Thieman says in the "President's Message," the theme "addresses the cultural, economic, geographic, historic, and political divides" in today's world.

What a fortuitous juxtaposition of ideas! It led me to this column's focus.

It may seem like a nearly impossible task, but we can try. We can begin in our own classrooms and help our students understand that, although there are many differences among the nations and cultures of the world, there are also many attributes, beliefs, and aspirations that are common to the world's peoples. One way to "cross borders and build bridges" that gains strength from the technology of the Internet is the tried and true instructional strategy of "pen pals"—or paired classrooms and partner schools. I can remember having a pen pal from California when I was in the fourth grade. We were studying regions of the United States and our teacher worked through an organization to set each student up with a pen pal. Growing up in a small town on the Ohio River, I learned quite a bit about California's climate and geography from this teaching activity and made a friendship that lasted until college.

The Internet has so many advantages over writing letters and using the mail service. Pictures, maps, and other graphics—even videos—can be

transmitted instantly to partner classrooms or schools. Entire classes can meet each other and learn about each other's school, community, and culture.

Moreover, this "people to people" approach has proved to be quite successful in bridging boundaries, not just across oceans and continents, but between schools, neighborhoods, and groups across the United States. There are many resources on the Internet that can help teachers link their students, their class, even their entire school with students across town, across the country, or in nations across the world.

I admit that it takes work, and maybe more importantly, it takes time from something else (e.g., drilling students on facts they need to pass a standardized test). But, I'd wager that students will fondly remember communicating with a pen pal or exchanging ideas with students from another nation far longer than they will remember why the experiences of the French and Indian War helped the colonists win the Revolutionary War.

I have selected websites that have a history of linking teachers and students together effectively and have Internet safeguards. I have also selected those that are free. There are organizations that charge a per student, per class, or per school fee. However, I don't think it's necessary to pay when there are plenty of free sites.

A word about Internet safety: First, all of the websites that I selected have information about Internet safety and safeguards—both for incoming and outgoing—information. Some have printable parental notice and approval forms. Many school districts have policies and rules regarding Internet safety for students. A good generic site that provides guidelines for Internet safety for teachers, students, and parents can be found at: Teacher Created Resources: [www.theteachersguide.com/Internetsafety.html](http://www.theteachersguide.com/Internetsafety.html).

### How to Design a Pen Pal Program

[k6educators.about.com/cs/languagearts/a/penpalprogram.htm](http://k6educators.about.com/cs/languagearts/a/penpalprogram.htm)

About.com is a good website for teachers, although it has a tendency to be a bit too commercial. However, this short article, “How to Design a Pen Pal Program,” which is designed for K-6 teachers—but is also very good for secondary teachers—gives some great ideas and has several links to other resources for teachers wanting to explore a pen pal program. Another article by the same author, Beth Lewis, “Pen Pals: The Incredible Teaching Tool,” is also helpful. Even though the URL includes the term “language arts,” there is a specific link for social studies teachers.



### Pen Pals: Friends across Land and Sea

[www.csmonitor.com/2007/0911/p18s02-hfks.html?page=1](http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0911/p18s02-hfks.html?page=1)

This is the best site I found for general information on setting up a pen pal program. It’s actually written to students—not adults. But it’s a good motivating article

to build student interest. At the end of the three-page article, there is a list of current websites that students or teachers can visit to set up pen pal programs.

### Kids Around the World

[www.katw.org/index.cfm](http://www.katw.org/index.cfm)

This is really a neat site. Teachers and students can find out what it’s like to “go to school in Bosnia,” or “celebrate your birthday in Benin,” or “fly a kite in the Dominican Republic.” Kids Around the World uses the Internet to introduce elementary school-age children in the United States to the lives of children of the same age in developing countries around the world. Students can work individually, in groups, or as a class, and hear interviews, see pictures of homes, friends, and schools of, for example, seven-year-old Steven in Mozambique or ten-year-old Zdravko in Bosnia. The site includes lesson plans and activities for grades K-5. It doesn’t help set up a true pen pal or partner school program; but it’s an excellent way to have students get a sense of what it would be like to be a child in a different part of the world.

### Kidlink

[www.kidlink.org/index.html](http://www.kidlink.org/index.html)

When users log onto Kidlink, they must select the language they want. In addition to English, other options include Arabic, Spanish, German, Hebrew, and a few that I couldn’t determine as they were written in the actual language. This is a well-designed program that works to develop life skills and international understanding. Students answer questions such as “How Do I Want the World to be Better When I Grow Up?” and share these answers with students from around the world. Registration of students and teachers is required for the program, but there is no charge for participation. There are more activities and programs on this site than I can describe. By the way, Silge from Norway answered the question this way: I want the world to be “A place 4 everybody. They live in peace and friendship.”

### Developing an Intergenerational Pen Pal Project

[nationalserviceresources.org/epicenter/practices/index.php?ep\\_action=view&web\\_id=33053](http://nationalserviceresources.org/epicenter/practices/index.php?ep_action=view&web_id=33053)

Boundaries aren’t always geographical or cultural. People are also divided by age. This site describes a project in Iowa where students in Spencer Middle School wanted a multidisciplinary, yearlong project that also involved service learning. Sixty students were paired with 60 senior volunteers. In the second semester, students wrote the “life story” of their pen pals and then presented these stories at an end-of-the-year pizza party, when the students met their pen pals. Yes, this is a different type of pen pal project, but it sounds wonderful. The Corporation for National and Community Service has some outstanding other project descriptions and teacher resources on their website.



### The Teacher Corner School Pen Pals and Key Pals

[www.theteacherscorner.net/penpals/index.php#](http://www.theteacherscorner.net/penpals/index.php#)

The Teacher Corner.net is a comprehensive site for teacher resources of all kinds. I logged on as a guest and could easily navigate to the School Pen Pal section. I clicked on “7<sup>th</sup> Grade” and found dozens of other classrooms and schools including the Manuel Barreto School in Puerto Rico and Ishmailli Okulu in Bergama, Turkey. Both listings were for a seventh grade classroom that wanted to be paired with a class in the United States. The website covers all grade levels and schools on all continents. There is a

teacher forum where you can meet (virtually, of course) other teachers who are in their pen pal program. It has a myriad number of other resources including lesson plans, printable worksheets, and bulletin board ideas.

## The United Nations CyberSchoolBus

[www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus](http://www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus)

This is not specifically a pen pal or partner school site, but it provides a wonderful array of stories and resources to help teachers and students learn about global issues and other cultures. The CyberSchoolBus site is listed in just about every list of the “Top 100” or “Top 10” resources for teachers. The website doesn’t shy away from controversial issues. From land mines, to terrible poverty and deprivation, to doping by athletes, the site has information designed for all grade levels. Its curriculum section includes such topics as those previously

mentioned as well as human rights, racial and ethnic discrimination, and cities of the world. Lesson plans designed for various grade levels are included. If your school is embarking on a pen pal or partner school project, you will find the CyberSchoolBus site to be invaluable.

## Teaching Tolerance

[www.tolerance.org/teach/index.jsp](http://www.tolerance.org/teach/index.jsp)

*Teaching Tolerance* is a magazine and a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. This is a great organization, the magazine is wonderful, and I’ve supported the SPLC for years. The *Teaching Tolerance* website has some of the best teaching resources available for reducing intolerance, discrimination, and violence. The “Gender Doesn’t Limit You” web-based curriculum, designed for the early grades, has been “proven to counteract gender bullying.” The “Boundary Crossing” marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Little Rock Nine’s efforts to cross

boundaries to integrate schools and asks the question, “Have we really learned to break down barriers?” You don’t have to be involved in a pen pal project to benefit from this site’s resources and uplifting hopefulness.

Some of the sites listed previously usually have an exhibit at the NCSS annual meeting. I hope that many of you will have an opportunity to be in San Diego. And I hope that we, as social studies educators, can help our students (and maybe ourselves) break down some barriers, build some bridges, and cross some boundaries. A pen pal/partner school program is an excellent way to do that. 🌐

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