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From learning with correspondence in a class to corresponding in the world as a learning community

The Writes of Children

The development of correspondence at Primary School Harmony from 1995 to 2015

Developing the classical mail idea

Starting our school in 1995 we took over the Freinet idea of corresponding with other classes. This was quite easy, because we had connections to the national and international Freinet movement. And once having the educational idea of learning by the written downs of others – we used as well our private contacts to make the idea real. So we got letters from other German schools, from Austria, Switzerland, Belgium and Italy (Südtirol) for some years.

But there were first events already showing the idea of further development.

A young colleague started a correspondence with Papa Meissa, a teacher in the Senegal. It ended when we tried to send old computers to Africa. It was impossible to make them cross the border. So a good idea ended fatally at the status of trying a right thing to early.

Our Austrian and Swiss colleagues started a simple but effectual exchange of little, often lyrical texts. They used oversized postcards and called it “Die Lyrik mit dem Poststempel” (“Posted lyrics”). Once a month we got several of these postcards either printed on a good old Freinet school printing machine or already written and lay-outed with the help of a computer. It was a wonderful esthetically enrichment of writing texts on our own. We saw how others expressed what impressed them. We learned by the example of others and our own works to use language for our own language learning.

The next step was done with a class in the Netherlands. I had met Hanneke van Diggelen and corresponded with her in English. The children corresponded in the language of mathematic! In both countries the classes followed the idea of Paul le Bohec and exchanged their own mathematical ideas. They sent each other their little sheets of paper with their mathematical inventions and they eagerly tried to find out what the others found out about mathematics. This project ended after a year when Hanneke stopped working at school.¹

In the years after the reunification of Germany we looked for contacts to schools in the former German Democratic Republic. Our partnership started with a class in Rostock and our “Kamuffel”-class. They wrote letters to and fro for several times and visited each other. They already started to exchange ideas of school development - including the children. Both schools were heading for an “open education”. The clue of all was – as good things need – a common topic. Doing their exchanges they found out, that both regions had some thousand years of ancient roots. Near Rostock there lived the “Slavic” people and near our school in the Rhineland there lived “the Celtic” people. Both sides started their researches and exchanged their knowledge. As the Slavs and Celts had met in these

¹ *Hanneke van Diggelen, Levend rekenen in de Klas / Ee + ee = 4*, In: *Levend rekenen, da's pas realistisch*, Instituut voor leerplanontwikkeling, SLO, Enschede/NL 1998

times – mainly peaceful to treat and exchange – the children did again - by the help of correspondence.

Fifteen years later, one of the former children, now studying education as an adult, said: “Well, I never was so excited by meeting other schools or children. But I remember that I liked travelling with my friends and learning new topics like “The Living Places of the Slavs”.

The Change to Electronic Techniques

At the same time we started cooperation with a primary school class of the seminar class (“Besuchsschule”) of the “Educational High School” in Klagenfurt, Carinthia. We worked together for many years finding continuation in Comenius projects and several seminars with the teachers’ students of that University. The classes did a classical successful correspondence via “yellow mail”, visited each other ... and started to work with the computers. By and by the children wrote their letters by e-mail only. In both classes they were online and the mails came all the time, always surprisingly.

We set up a weekly electronic chat hour of our “Poems’ Corners”. Both classes had a class institution they called “Dichterlesung” (“Poems Corner”). The children in Austria and Germany sat together in their classes and read their freely written texts, their “text libre” to each other once a week. So we had the idea to exchange children’s texts by the net. Always two children from each class had once a week by internet a reading date using “Skype”. They had elected some texts from each class and read them to each other by the net. Soon they presented each other lectures of their own topics, as they did in their classes as well.

And so it happened that one day Volcan from Klagenfurt and Hatice from Eitorf had their chat time together. And soon they had found out, they both speak Turkish. And so they talked Turkish! Their family language became important! The distance between Eitorf and Klagenfurt wasn’t important any more. The closeness of their native languages made Turkish to their language of learning!

We had learned that the net’s speed and technology had closed a gap in Europe! Most people in the world already as children learn two languages. To speak two or more language is normal! We created another piece of normality.

Soon we started to do further work by the help of Comenius projects. Since the year 2000 we learned by several Comenius projects to do school development together. Without the quick communication of the electronic machines it often would have been much slower and harder. We cooperated with children, teachers, parents, schools, universities and societies in Austria, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Lithuania and Slovenia. We won several prizes and got high decorations.

We did beside e-mail correspondences of the children many things like “Books of monthly Records” or we invented “The Question of the week” and a “Comenius Logo” of our own. We made exchanges of the children from the age of 10 to 18. We exchanged teachers to give a feed back of friends by a questionnaire of our own about what we had seen at the guest schools. They were evaluated together in “School Leader Meetings” of six schools. We gave lessons in English and German during our visits at the schools we visited.

To the “natural” use of Electronics

Marcus Ray, a teacher from Lark Rise School in England lives with these computer things. He did so long before us, he seemed to know everything about electronic media and the colleagues from Germany asked him everything. Without him and his electronics there would have been a way into our partnership, but not this successful way through it!

In 2005 an employee of the Bedfordshire County Government had the idea to invite four German primary schools to England. We went there and two of us still today have - even after changing headmasters on all both sides - really sustainable partnerships².

Since 2006 every year in early summer a group of more than thirty children and five teachers go - in the first years by plane, now by coach - to England. Two weeks before or after, a group of English children and adults finds its way to Germany. We never sleep in guest families, but in the visited school like doing "Reading Nights in School". We don't know exchange visit programs. The children meet each other and accompany their pals during the three days of visit in their everyday learning. The Lark Rise children organize their learning by themselves, with the help of their Harmony friend. Vice versa the Harmony children visit the lessons of Lark Rise going into their classes.

Before starting the visits the children get writing pals. Before and after the visits they write e-mails regularly to each others. We know individual letters and corporately prepared writing actions to describe celebration days like Christmas, Eastern or Carnival. However, the Xmas cards are still sent over the Channel by good old yellow mail.

During their stays abroad they children of both countries are together all the time and they interact, communicate, extent competences -, more and more intensively - because they learn together! The learning of the foreign language becomes absolutely natural, as well on the level of meeting in action and spoken language as on the electronic level of correspondence and written language.

Soon our English friends started to offer German language lessons in their school. They started to change their science lessons to a more open self active way of learning. We learned a lot about feed backs after lessons and about evaluation.

Most interesting was the adults' and children's view on education. "How do you manage that Harmony children keep their good and inclusive behavior even without the attendance of teachers?" and "How much discipline the Lark Rise children have!" When one of the German children reported about the good behavior of the Lark Rise children in Harmony children's parliament, another child added the question:" Doesn't mean a better behavior a better way of learning?" So the children decided a "Childrens University³ with the topic "Behavior". So the very high level of already available self discipline was expanded by an increasing better self control of working discipline.

During the visits of the English children at Harmony there always is half an hour of internet broadcasting. In England the English parents come together to meet their children in Germany on a big screen and talk to them via a chat system.

2 Watch the film: http://www.grundschule-harmonie.de/alte_website/index.html

3 Every second week Harmony Primary School offers for three days lectures and seminars by adults and/or children. It can be without or with topics. The children's council decided this kind of learning.

We as well invented the “Choir on Wire” – meetings at our schools. Our choirs have a rehearsal broadcasted by image and sound in both countries. At this same time we sing songs together. Not only because of this event Harmony can kids sing the Lark Rise School Song perfectly.

One of the most outstanding events was the exchange of class teachers. Our Christine Schaumann went for three days to England and “took over” Marcus Rays’ “orange class”, while he was the teacher in her class of the “Bats” in Harmony. Christine gave lessons and Marcus accompanied the children learning by themselves. What an example for live long learning!

And more sustainability

After having formed a “FreiNet” (“frei” means “free”) with five schools within the Freinet movement, we joined in 2005 an organization called “Blick über den Zaun”⁴, which means “Spying over the Fence”. We became member of this union of far more than one hundred German schools. These schools aim the claim to go ways of “Modern Democratic Schools”. There always are eight schools together in one workshop for four years. Every half a year two persons of all schools visit one of the group’s member schools for three days. These friends (!) -they are no state inspection (!) – stay for three days and give a feed back to the school management, the staff, the parents and - if wished - to the press.

In 2013 we started a new workshop, this time a European workshop. Now there are four German schools with a school from Luxembourg, one from the Switzerland and one from Italy. We worked the same old way as before, until our children demanded: “We want to meet as well. We can do school development as well, we know how it works!” So in 2015 there are the first primary school children meetings in Freiburg and Luxembourg. Older pupils from schools with older classes already have their own “Spying Workshop” in the big organization.

So the netting between schools, communities, regions and Europe grows more and more – seemingly impossible without using electronic correspondence.

When in the past first pupils and teacher learned to cooperate by correspondence, now schools, communities and ministries start learning perhaps provoked by the help of electronic correspondence.

What started with Freinet and other most intelligent educationers find its future development in nowadays work reality of schools. It’s up to the Freinet people to find young people to go with this future work or at least let history books remember Freinet and his movement that had laid the basics for today.

And, it is not the sometimes blinding fascination of electronics, but to know what using electronic contacts for. Let’s follow the democratic idea of Paul e Bohec: “Control by yourself before being controlled” and “Express by writing what impresses you”.

⁴ <http://www.blickueberdenzaun.de/>

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