

Article originally published in *Educators' Spotlight Digest*: Volume 1, Issue 3 (Fall 2006)

## ***Teleconferencing Technology Facilitates Collaboration***

by MariRae Dopke-Wilson

Big, comprehensive projects involving multiple teachers, components and electronic media can daunt the most ambitious educator. But for Library Media Specialist Bonnie French, big projects are no problem! A pioneer SOS database contributor, Bonnie can be aptly dubbed the 'queen of collaboration.' Her motto is: *"Why should I not do something just because I don't know how. If I reach out, someone will be there to help me."*

Bonnie (photo at right) is known by colleagues at Syracuse's McKinley-Brighton School for a contagious enthusiasm that spawns exciting school-wide projects. Couple this spirit with her quest for new technology, and voila, you have a multiple-school project in the works. That was the scenario in Spring of 2006 when her district distributed new



teleconferencing carts. At a district meeting, Bonnie says she teamed up with fellow LMS Monica Minion (photo at left) at Bellevue Elementary and the multi-school collaboration began. *"We decided to try something simple. May/June was the perfect time of year to experiment. We met via conference after school to troubleshoot setting up the equipment, lighting, sound, etc. We found a book which classes at both schools could read together. Then we introduced just about every class in both schools to the equipment, behavior rules, etc., while we continued to learn to troubleshoot. Because we kept doing it over and over, we became comfortable using the equipment and*

*with the concept of team teaching this way. Teachers were also introduced to the equipment - many of them took their turn at learning how to operate the camera. During this time we were building enthusiasm, confidence, skills."*

### **The 'Use it or lose it' Rule**

***Continued...***



*Above images taken from actual under-water photography by students visiting Australia's Great Barrier Reef.*

Those exercises paved the way for Bonnie's collaborative OCEAN lesson, a comprehensive five month project plan in which third graders at two schools learned about the fascinating characteristics of the ocean and sea life via video conferencing. *"I know the rule 'use it or lose it' so I knew I had to come up with a project for the next school year. Because we are now a Reading First school, I decided to work through the science team. I met with a science teacher I had worked with before. Looking at the schedule we found that I had flexible scheduling during the time she taught one 3rd grade class and the other science teacher taught another 3rd grade class. So I put a message on the Syracuse Central School District LMS listserv asking if anyone could find a 3rd grade class to teach the ocean with us via video conferencing on Mondays and/or Tuesdays. Monica said she could."*

Bonnie and fellow McKinley-Brighton teachers coordinated with Bellevue Elementary educators regarding who would teach content / research lessons and when. They were also troubleshooting along the way deciding what teaching methods and tools worked best with video conference team teaching. *"We decided the end product would be a Powerpoint of the children's animal reports. We also decided that we would start after the ELA tests in January and continue until finished. Planning would be done by email or by talking on the video equipment. I think we even had the teachers meet each other at the beginning - after school via video conference. During the year we were lucky that various interns decided to work at our schools so they had hands on experience in working with the equipment."*

School Media graduate student intern at Syracuse University's School of Information Studies, Christene Gantos (see photo at right), e-mailed the listserv regarding work on the project. Bonnie remembered that for the first time she had forty 3rd graders all making individual powerpoints at the same time. *"I asked if she could make a Powerpoint on how to make a Powerpoint [presentation]. She did, and it turned out great!"*



Christene recalls a valuable lesson from Bonnie, *"Bonnie wanted me to sit with a student and show her the tutorial prototype so I could revise it. This was so invaluable! I revised some things based on the student's feedback. I learned that the learner should be part of the collaborative team, too."*

The Powerpoint lesson on 'How to make a Powerpoint' is an impressive component from the Ocean unit. It and the complete lesson plan can be found at [www.informationliteracy.org](http://www.informationliteracy.org) by signing in, clicking on 'search of lessons' and typing *Bonnie French* in the 'author' space.

You may be thinking, 'I don't want to do a unit/lesson spanning that much time,' or, 'we don't have that kind of technology at my school.' Nevertheless, the OCEAN set of lessons is an excellent example of a collaborative project that you may wish to consider and adapt for your own needs. Project activities focus on language arts & science subject skills with these **Instructional Objectives**:

- To define the characteristics of oceans
- To describe the animals and plants that live in the ocean
- To describe the dangers of the ocean
- To identify ways sea creatures help each other survive in the ocean
- To write a report describing the description, diet, habitat, and adaptations of a sea creature

### **Project Rewards & Challenges**

Was this two-school collaborative project labor intensive? Bonnie says, 'sure,' but she didn't have to do it by herself. Once again, networking and sharing ideas made others want to take part and contribute. At McKinley-Brighton, the project was enriched and the labor was lessened by including other classes in portions of the project. *"We decided to turn our storytelling room into an ocean. That meant the science teachers could teach the ocean to other classes, and I could choose ocean related stories for other grades, then invite them on a tour of the ocean. The Art teacher could have kids at other grade levels as well as the 3rd graders do art projects for the room. After one story, the teacher assistant told me the teacher had a whole bunch of slides about fish. The teacher came in and said she had just visited her daughter in Australia and had fantastic pictures of the Great Barrier Reef that I could show to all the classes. Somehow when I start collaborating with others, things just happen and more and more people seem to get caught up in the excitement."*

Collaboration from colleagues provides Bonnie with the support she needs to enjoy her work. While she cites learning the teleconferencing equipment was challenging, district personnel would quickly help when needed. She believes long term projects like the Ocean lessons are more fun because she always feels rewarded when a project ends successfully. *"Students at all levels can be successful in different ways. It felt great seeing the strengths that different people brought to a project. Because Nadine knew so much about science and about Powerpoints, I learned advanced skills in Powerpoints, Jane knew so much about the troubleshooting aspects, Michele loved the literature aspect. Through the project she met the intern at Bellevue, and they ended up teaching a separate lesson to 1st graders that involved both of them using puppets. Monica was so calm about every challenge. The teachers were so willing to try teaching in a different way."*

In addition to being an SOS for Information Literacy contributor, Bonnie French looks to the database as a valuable resource for finding new ideas and information literacy related teaching materials. *"When I first started teaching, everyone did his/her own thing behind closed doors. No one shared anything. Times are different now. We should be collaborating. When I search the web for ideas, it's difficult to find collaborative lessons. When I search on SOS for ideas, I expect to find collaborative lessons. Not lessons that I'm going to do exactly as written, but lessons I can get ideas from. I love the idea that I can go to SOS for ppts, etc. I can just download a ppt and change it to fit the needs of my students! I wish there were more of them."*

## Tips for fostering Collaboration

Here are some helpful tips Bonnie finds effective for getting others involved in your lessons and projects.

- 1. Build relationships in your school. If there's an obstacle, find a way around it. (For ex. Working through the science teachers in a Reading First School.)*
- 2. Start by collaborating with a person you eat lunch with or a teacher you really get along with. If one teacher asks you to teach a lesson to her class, teach that lesson to all the kids at that grade level. See where that leads.*
- 3. Talk to other LMS's at meetings. If someone asks you to collaborate on an idea, say yes. Ask others to collaborate with you. There's a 50 % chance someone will say yes.*
- 4. What makes collaboration work? It works when people "buy in" to your idea, when others can give input, when they don't feel they have to do something.*

*SOS for Information Literacy wishes to thank Bonnie French for the excellent lesson plans she has contributed to the database.*

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## About the Author

**MariRae Dopke-Wilson is a veteran media producer. She is the feature story writer for the Educators' Spotlight Digest and producer of many video clips for the *S.O.S. for Information Literacy* project. In the past several years, she has interviewed dozens of library media specialists and captured their stories in both print and video.**