

Promoting Learning With ePALS: A Case Study

A diverse Florida classroom connects with European peers

*By James Korycinski
April 2001*

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A
B
C

ePALS
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Promoting Learning With ePALS: A Case Study

Can ePALS really help improve student literacy, develop cultural awareness, and motivate students to learn? What about addressing state standards and testing, or integrating technology into various subjects? **Absolutely.**

The following study was written by Mr. James Korycinski, a National Board Certified Teacher and former Teacher of the Year from Florida.

ePALS would like to thank Mr. Korycinski for his permission to reprint this work, as well as for his dedication and passion in teaching and learning.

Europe ePALS Unit

By James Korycinski

INSTRUCTIONAL CONTEXT

One hundred and fifty two seventh grade social studies students (all of my students), ages 11 through 13, participated in a unit involving European Epals. The majority of students involved in this unit were of Caucasian descent with English as their first language. Fifty-five percent of the students involved in the unit were female and forty-five percent were male. I also have twenty-one students with specific learning disabilities: ten with Attention Deficit Disorder (most are classified as ADHD which means Attention Deficit Hyper Disorder), five who are emotionally handicapped, five with sensory/motor skills disabilities, and one with hearing loss. I also have sixteen gifted students in my advanced classes. My students come from a variety of economic backgrounds and learning levels. Most live in middle to upper middle class families. Their parents work in a variety of professions including law, medicine, engineering (*Pratt & Whitney* is located in our small community), small business, and even dairy and cattle farming. But home life can also be very challenging for about ten percent of my students. These are the students who are living just above the poverty level, have guardians instead of parents, or have had a major tragedy occur.

My school currently has an enrollment of 1450 students and has been classified an "A" level school by the state of Florida for the past two years. Only twenty-two secondary schools have been given this honor in the past two years. A school-wide program is in place that is designed to help students excel on the new *Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test*.

Students involved in this unit were placed into classes based on their Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test stanine scores. I teach three different kinds of classes: advanced, on-level, and one inclusion class. The two advanced classes (65 students) involved in this unit consist of students who have average stanine scores of 7, 8, or 9 on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (these literacy scores are based on 9 being the highest). These two advanced classes also include gifted students. The gifted program at my school currently focuses on math, science, and language arts. The gifted program does not offer a social studies curriculum at the present time. The three on-level classes (87 students) involved in this unit consist of students who have average stanine scores of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test. Typical on-level classes throughout my school consist of students who score 4, 5, or 6 on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test. I also have an inclusion class. My inclusion class includes specific learning disabled students and emotionally handicapped students and on-level students as well. I am team-teaching these students with an Exceptional Student Education (E.S.E.) teacher. The E.S.E. students have special needs and therefore have detailed Individual Education Plans (I.E.P.'s) developed by our Exceptional Student Education Program. These plans will be discussed in greater detail within my analysis pages. I also teach on an academic team of five teachers: math, science, reading, language arts, and social studies. All the academic classrooms are in close proximity to each other.

The range of abilities displayed by the students who participated in this unit varies greatly. My gifted and advanced students have reading levels as high as high school and college, while my specific learning disabled and have reading levels as low as the third grade. Because of this, it is imperative that all types of learning styles be used across the curriculum. I use a variety of resources in my class such as desk maps, globes, laserdiscs, and computers.

The Europe Epals Unit focuses around the use of computers, more specifically the use of email accounts and the internet. I use the internet as a major educational tool in my classroom. While taking my class, students become involved in internet research, experience interactive websites, and join various internet learning communities.

I shape the use of these different learning styles around a seventh grade geography curriculum based on the Western Hemisphere, Florida's Sunshine State Standards (which I wrote for our county), and the five themes of geography: Location, Place, Human-Environment Interaction, Movement, and Region. Florida's Sunshine State Standards require me to teach subject matter that goes well beyond Western Hemisphere Geography, including major social studies themes.

PLANNING AND INSTRUCTION

The theme for the Europe Epals Unit was for students to learn about various cultural, historical, economical, and geographical topics through real world connections. My learning goals (or objectives) were for students to learn about these topics first hand, from actual European students, through a series of letters. The letters focused upon various cultural, historical, economical, and geographical topics. Students were to research and complete class lessons dealing with these topics before drafting their letters. I felt that the goals of the unit were very important because students were going to be learning about European culture, history, economics, and geography through real life situations instead of from less personal forms of communication such as textbooks, videos, etc.

There were several challenges to this unit. First, I planned for each of my 152 students to have a teacher-monitored email account through the epals.com

website. In order for students to receive these accounts, I had to get approval from our County Technology Committee. After much debate, the committee finally gave me permission to use the Epals website. I was given this permission with the strict stipulation that I would use a teacher monitored email system, which luckily was offered by the Epals website.

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Every student also had to hand in parental permission forms before using the Epals website. After finally receiving all the proper forms, I signed up my 152 students for teacher monitored email accounts. All of the accounts would be under my control. The teacher-monitored system gave me access to the accounts (including passwords) and I also had the ability to receive flagged emails. The flag email system was very important to the teacher monitoring process. Flagged emails were sent to my account and included emails with any inappropriate language, unwanted solicitation, or file attachments. File attachments were the main concern of the county technology committee because these attachments can slip through the county's firewall system. A firewall is designed to prevent students from viewing inappropriate content.

Once all my students had email accounts, I had to pair each of them with an epal from Europe. This proved to be even more challenging than getting permission to do the unit. I started contacting various teachers in Europe through the epals.com search engine. I learned that many of the European teachers were using only twenty or thirty students, which was not comparable to my 152 students. Therefore I decided that I would set up a different Europe class with each of my classes. Eventually I was keeping consistent contact with two German teachers, a French teacher, an Austrian teacher, and a Swedish teacher. All of the teachers had similar goals. They wanted to share information about social studies issues with American students, and at the same time, wanted their students to master the English language. I chose these five

teachers out of the 30,000 available teachers on epals.com for these reasons. Along the way we had to communicate often and get used to the fact that we could not communicate with each other instantaneously. We had to wait for email and then respond. We had to let each other know when we would be scheduled into internet labs and when to expect student emails. Together we created lists showing pairings of students and student email addresses. This was necessary for communication and organization. We also communicated in fun ways. I am the advisor of my school's website club and I had my website club members add a European welcome page to my school website. It included class photos of my students, a joint project created by a group of my students about school life in Florida, maps of Florida, and various links to NASA websites, Florida Everglades websites, and Seminole Indian websites. In return, the European teachers sent me their school website addresses also. Communication was taking off and my students were very anxious to receive their epals and email accounts. They were excited about starting the unit.

After the email system was in place on both sides of the ocean, my final challenges were to teach my students how to use the epals email system and to make sure everything went smoothly (I am positive that my principal was sitting in his office biting his fingernails over this one). Many of my students had trouble with the Europe Epals Unit during the first few weeks. They would forget passwords and had problems with the email system as a whole. Problems included slow typing, not understanding how to search folders within their account, and sending to wrong email addresses, to name a few. During the first few weeks, I was thankful that I was team teaching with another teacher during my inclusion class. She took everything in great stride and we eventually accepted the fact that problems would be arising frequently in this particular class. It was much easier to combat the problems with two teachers. I also had assistance from media center personnel for all my classes and I eventually called upon a few parent volunteers. Most of my students have computers at home and past experience with email accounts. The unit was easier for the students who had computers at home. However, after about the third letter, most of my students could use the email system effectively (except

for a rare few in each class). When students started asking other students questions about common problems, it took the burden off of me. I therefore encouraged them to help each other. I found that after the third letter I was spending most of my time teaching students about what to write and how to approach their writing, instead of teaching them how to use the email system.

"...I was spending most of my time teaching students about what to write and how to approach their writing, instead of teaching them how to use the email system."

The first three letters were the most difficult part of the unit for all of us. The learning goals for the first assignments were for students to learn more about European culture. I wanted my students to learn about the lives of European students and how European culture differs from American culture. It was my belief that if my students learned about European culture from someone their own age they would be more involved, and therefore have a better understanding of European culture. The first assignment did not require much research. I wanted students to have fun during the start of the unit and did not want them to think that this unit was going to be a lot of boring research work (the research would come later). The first assignment was divided into three introductory writing prompts. Since usage of the email system was going to take practice, I assigned three fun, warm up prompts for students to focus on in their letters. The prompts stated: 1) Write a letter to your European epal introducing yourself. Include your age, hobbies, sports you play, school life, home life, etc. 2) Write a letter to your European epal about Florida. Include vacation spots, geography, climate, cities, etc. 3) Write a letter to your European epals describing American holidays and/or popular vacation destinations for Americans. I also convinced all the European teachers to have their students write back focusing on the same kinds of prompts according to where they lived. I felt that these beginning prompts would increase my students' understanding of important cultural, historical, and geographical topics in Europe and would help students make important connections with European students. I envisioned that the European students would

eventually teach my students about hundreds of cultural, historical, economical, and geographical topics in Europe. Topics like the North Sea, The Chunnel and its importance to the economics of Europe, the sport of cricket, what European students ate in their school cafeterias, dinner manners at home, national holidays, and fashion in France. The list was going to be endless.

During the exchange of the first three letters there were many challenges. It was a problem if a student was ever absent. This was the most frustrating part of the unit. Every time a class went into the internet lab, a few students across the ocean would not receive an email. This made grading difficult. Eventually many students were allowed to use the epals accounts from home (with parent permission) if they were absent during a lab day. Monitoring absenteeism became time consuming. Also, several of the first letters were sent to the wrong email addresses and I realized how important it was to stress the use of correct email address. Some students were also accidentally deleting their emails that were sent from Europe. Getting everything right was a very slow process. It took much patience on both sides of the ocean.

After the first assignment was over, my students were very comfortable with the email system. This is when I started the second phase of the unit. I wanted them to learn about current events in Europe that affected the culture, economics, history, and geography of the region. On a regular basis, I searched newspapers and magazines and kept up consistent communication with the European teachers. We did several current event assignments throughout the school year including the U.S. Presidential Election, the ski lift accident in Austria, (which was right down the street from our Austrian epals), the gasoline strikes affecting Europe, the summer Olympics in Sydney, and several more. In February, a major catastrophe struck Europe. Foot and mouth disease hit the United Kingdom and there was fear that it was going to spread. This was obviously going to be the major event of the year in Europe. During the first week of the breakout, I started doing diligent research on my own as well as with the European teachers. The European teachers were sending me more information than I could use. I created several lessons based around the subject of foot and mouth disease. In one lesson, I compared the

disease to Mad Cow Disease because many students and faculty members at my school were confusing the two. I also created a lesson that required students to create timelines, bar graphs, pie graphs, and charts based on Foot and Mouth Disease statistics over the years. One chart in particular dealt with the economies of Germany, France, Austria, and Sweden and how much the economies of these countries relied upon agriculture as a source of GNP. The objective of the lesson was to teach students the seriousness of Foot and Mouth Disease through statistics and to also prove how contagious the disease is and how it can destroy economies if not stopped.

One of the most important lessons learned by my students occurred when they received emails about how the European students were being affected by Foot and Mouth Disease. My students learned first hand information from the European students and teachers. Some of the European students worked on farms in France and Germany. They had witnessed the slaughtering of thousands of sheep, pigs, cattle, and goats. They could not walk on farmland and their cars were driven over sterilization mats. When driving on the roads, they had to go through several checkpoints. The goal of the checkpoints was to make sure that no sheep, pigs, cattle, or goats were being transported. Their local grocery stores were being greatly affected by the outbreak. Meat was disappearing from the grocery store shelves. I had no idea at the beginning of the unit that the real world connections gained by my students would be so sad and devastating.

ANALYSIS OF TWO STUDENTS' RESPONSES

A. Lauren

I chose Lauren because she presented a variety of challenges to me as a teacher. She had never used email before, did not know how to type very well, and was not completing her homework and classwork assignments on time. However, she was in my advanced class and had great potential. I stated to her parents at the first parent/teacher conference that her "C-" average could easily be an "A" average if she put forth the effort. I felt that she needed more motivation than the average student in my advanced classes and hoped that the Europe Epal Unit would make her more excited about my class.

After I paired Lauren with a European epal, I saw a dramatic change in her. Lauren and her epal hit it off right away and were emailing each other from home on a consistent basis; with their parent's permission. I found that Lauren was handing in several extra credit assignments relating to the Europe Epal Unit. Her grade quickly went from a low "C" average to an "A-" average. I used the internet as an incentive for some students and Lauren became one of these students. I made an agreement with her that if she handed in her weekly homework assignment, then she could use the internet in my class during homeroom and check her epal account. She was very excited about the Europe Epal Unit and it was evident that this unit was the boost that she needed.

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It was amazing to see all the things that Lauren and her European epal had in common. She eventually started calling her epal her "identical twin". Their names were similar (Lauren and Laura), and even their last names were only one letter off from each other. They were born during the same month, they both rode horses competitively, and they both liked ice cream and pizza. All the similarities were daunting. Lauren was starting to learn more about Europe than I did in all my college years. Her parents were elated. They were

especially happy when she signed up for typing class during the second semester. I could see why she was so excited about the unit and why she was handing in extra credit assignments and taking typing classes.

Most students had three or four letters completed in their email accounts for the first assignment, but Lauren had about fifteen. I could have picked a variety of emails from Lauren's account as evidence of her accomplishments. She had numerous emails addressed to Europe concerning Florida's environment and history, American holidays, and top American vacation spots. She went above and beyond the expectations that I had for the first assignment. For example, Lauren answered dozens of questions that were asked of her from her epal. Questions that related to every major American holiday, what days the holidays were on, vacation destinations for Americans and Floridians, and even her favorite vacation destinations. She mentioned major cities in Florida such as Miami and Orlando, along with the major theme parks of Florida. Lauren was meeting all the objectives of the first assignment. Every email Lauren sent was full of details and every email she received from Europe was also full of details. I was learning with her and regularly reading her emails to my classes as examples.

Lauren also did incredible work for the second assignment. She created a timeline based around the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease. She tracked the spread of the disease during the months of February and March. After creating her timeline she followed up her research with excellent questions to her epal. She asked her epal if the disease was affecting her, since her epal rode horses and since there were many cancellations of horse races and competitions in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Lauren's epal replied back without much concern at first. In early March, Lauren's epal was still riding and was not concerned about the disease because she lived in Kiel, Germany, which was far away from the United Kingdom (where the outbreak started). But by the middle of March, Lauren's epal started showing great concern. This is when foot and mouth disease spread to the continent of Europe (around March 15th). Lauren's epal talked about her worries of not being able to ride horses. Lauren was meeting the objectives of the unit because she was learning first hand information about an issue

in Europe that was affecting the entire community of Europe in several ways. This disease was affecting the geographical movement of people, the economy of Europe, and the history of Europe. This information was also very personal to Lauren because she was very concerned for her new friend.

B. Chris

I also chose Chris for a variety of reasons. He is part of our Exceptional Student Education Program and is emotionally handicapped (E.H.). Chris has been a great challenge to me as a teacher. I have had many emotionally handicapped students in the past, so his behavior was nothing new to me. I have to talk to Chris without any type of aggression because he can easily be provoked. I also have to be very understanding and patient with Chris because he gets frustrated easily. In class, he has a difficult time following directions and likes to get out of his seat. I had to create a special behavior tracking system with Chris. He receives a weekly report updating his current grades and behavior, which his parents sign. If he has a good week and has his parents sign it, then I give him incentives such as ten minutes with computer games or candy. If he starts misbehaving on a consistent basis then we switch to daily sheets. His parents are very supportive and have made a difference in Chris' life.

Chris is part of my inclusion class and has the advantage of having two teachers for social studies. He cannot type and therefore he was given a typing partner for the Europe Epal Unit. In the internet lab, I sat Chris next to one of his good friends, who also happens to be one of my fastest typists. Chris also has a lot of trouble with the writing process. His Florida Writes! scores in my class have been a very low 2.0 to 3.0, with 6.0 being the highest (Florida Writes! is the main evaluation for student writing in Florida). He has trouble putting thoughts down onto paper and focusing. He also has a lot of trouble with conventions, support, analysis, and interpretation. On top of all this, he lacks consistent effort. He is always giving up and needs to be coached quite often.

Chris had a very slow start with his first Europe epal assignment. It took him at least three weeks to understand the email system and how to use it correctly. He forgot his password every time we went in

the internet lab, deleted emails from Europe accidentally, sent email to the wrong address, and did not know how to use his inbox and send folders. He basically had trouble with every aspect of the email system and usage of the internet in general. Because of this, I allowed Chris to use my class computer during research periods and teamed up with his Language Arts teacher. Together, Chris' language arts teacher and I evaluated his work. Because he was being graded on the unit in two classes, he had more time to work out any misunderstandings. His first assignments did not contain much information, but at least he was learning how to use the email system and the internet correctly. His first email letters were very brief without much support or detail. In his email letters he would hastily state multiple questions and at times it was very difficult to decipher what he was trying to say in his letters.

"...during the second assignment Chris came alive... For the first time all year Chris was motivated and was putting forth effort like I had never seen before."

After the first assignment, Chris was finally familiar with the email system and was having fewer problems with it. He was still typing very slowly in the internet lab and still needed help from his typing partner. But during the second assignment Chris came alive. The Foot and Mouth Disease that broke out in Europe had a personal connection with Chris. It turned out that Chris' uncle gave him a bunch of stock in McDonald's. When Chris started hearing about the new meat policies of McDonald's, I saw my window of opportunity. I knew that this would be an issue that would personally motivate Chris and I was on the phone with his parents right away. They had Chris cut out newspaper and magazine articles at home for extra credit. They also had him call his uncle several times during the foot and mouth crisis to ask questions. For the first time all year Chris was motivated and was putting forth effort like I had never seen before. He created a pie graph and bar graph for the foot and mouth lesson that showed more effort than I had ever seen from Chris. He actually stayed after class that day for five minutes! His pie graph contained all the right details and he did not need help. His pie graph

had a title, the correct percentages, the correct labeling of the percentages, and efficient color-coding. His bar graph was even better. It was very organized and again had a title and the correct numbers and labels. Finally, Chris followed up his research assignment with the best email he had written all year. It was more personal and consisted of a series of questions about foot and mouth disease in Europe. He asked his Austrian epal if Foot and Mouth Disease was going to affect her country and if she had a McDonald's in Austria. He also explained that he had a vested interest in McDonald's stock.

REFLECTION

This was the first year I offered epal accounts to all my students. I felt that it was not fair to other students if I offered this unit to only a few of my classes. I literally spent hundreds of hours on this unit during the 2000-2001 school year. I checked my Epals email account, school email account, and personal email account everyday and everyday there was some sort of message to reply to or some sort of task to be done. Along the way I have created lasting relationships with seven European teachers and I am confident that several of my students have created lasting relationships also. These are fruits of my labor.

"My students and I have learned a great deal about Europe and I could have never predicted the success that has come with this unit."

Katherina, one of the German teachers, plans on coming to America for a one-year teaching assignment. I will welcome her with open arms if she ever wants to visit Florida. My students and I have learned a great deal about Europe and I could have never predicted the success that has come with this unit. All the hard work has also paid off for my future students. I have email accounts in place and know how to manage 152 student email accounts effectively. All of the European teachers have said that they would love to work with me again in the coming years also. Since the system is now in place and the coming years will be much easier. I feel that this unit has been the greatest educational accomplishment of my teaching career and I am very proud of it. My parents are proud also and

my fellow colleagues are curious. My administrators and County Technology Committee are impressed that I pulled the unit off with no problems whatsoever, and have a new confidence in distance learning education. I feel like I have set a precedent for our county.

"Not only have my students created lasting relationships with European students, but they have also become computer experts!"

Not only have my students created lasting relationships with European students, but they have also become computer experts! Currently, I take my classes down to the internet lab and I do not have to say a word at the beginning of the class. They sit down, log onto the internet, open their email accounts, and start reading and replying to emails. Most of my teaching now involves the research and writing process. I focus on research skills, writing skills, and the content of their writings more than anything else. With Lauren, my future plans for the year include improving her writing process. She gets excited when she is typing her email letters and still needs to slow down. She needs to realize that there are other goals to the unit like proper usage of conventions. For example, in her letter to Germany she had some run-on sentences and misspellings. She has really taken off with this unit, but she still needs to improve. As far as the epals email system goes, she is an expert. She has actually taught me some things about epals.com.

My future goals with Chris also include improvements in the writing process. I do not have the time to teach him how to type, but recently I have worked with him on rough drafts. He creates the rough drafts before going to the internet lab. This has helped Chris tremendously. He feels more confident when he goes into the internet lab and can focus more on his writing skills. His most current email letters about Foot and Mouth Disease have had more focus than his previous email letters. For example, he introduced the topic of Foot and Mouth Disease, asked a series of questions about the disease, and had some personal concerns. Chris is also still confused when he uses his email folders. Sometimes he cannot tell the difference between his inbox and his sent items or trash folders and needs help. But he is very close to mastering the program.

Now, when my classes go into the internet lab and work on the Europe Epal Unit, it is a professional teaching environment that I love. Whenever other teachers are in the lab I feel very proud of my students.

"...whenever other teachers are in the lab I feel very proud of my students. The accomplishments they achieve are evident."

The accomplishments they achieve while in the internet lab are very evident. Students are sharing their email letters with the class and the messages they receive are always educational, in a personal way. Many of my students have asked me what I am going to do with their accounts next year. They are concerned about their accounts and want me to save them. I have not decided what I am going to do with the 152 accounts. Many students have been emailing the European students from their home accounts and I wonder what will happen to the students who do not have computers at home, or whose parents do not let them use the internet at home. I wonder if I will be ending valuable relationships. This is something I do not want to do. Also, teachers in my school may want to adopt the accounts next year. These are some things that I have to consider. After all, the student email letters reveal that my students understand important social studies topics beyond the classroom and I am sure that the eighth grade teachers would want to expand upon what my students have learned so far. Mad Cow Disease and Foot and Mouth Disease seem to be topics that will be covered and debated well into the next school year. Eighth grade teachers also teach a unit about the Holocaust and my students could learn a great deal about this issue from the European students.

"...the student email letters reveal that my students understand important social studies topics beyond the classroom..."

Even though the Europe epal assignments were successful and can be continued into the next school year, there are still many things I would do differently. Next year, I am going to print out web pages from the

epals.com site and teach students how to use the email system in a classroom setting BEFORE we go into the internet lab. I found that at the beginning of the unit, it was very chaotic and hard to assist all of my students with the email process. I was trying to teach the use of the email system as we went (because this was the first year I had used the epals.com website) and I was not ready for the amount of chaos that occurred in the beginning of the unit. I would also be more organized with the pairings of my students. Much confusion was caused through the pairings of students this year and I need to work on this topic more closely with the European teachers. I am also going to have my students write biographies, so the European students have an opportunity to choose an epal who has something in common with them. Lauren taught me how exciting the unit can be if students are paired with epals that they have a lot in common with. Keeping in touch more through the mail also adds a nice touch to the unit. This year we exchanged a few culture boxes, but I did not exchange culture boxes in every class. The classes I did exchange culture boxes with felt more in touch with their European epals. Pictures were exchanged in all my classes, but receiving an actual box of items from Europe added a more personal touch to the unit. I would finally love to experiment with web cameras next year. This is a great way to form personal relationships. I tried to use web cameras this year, but the time zone changes make it very difficult. Next year I will have more time to research this challenging goal.

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