

Project Ibunka

To: Members of the Rotary eClub of the Southwest USA

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to write an essay for the Rotary eClub of the Southwest USA. Mr. Rushton Hurley of your club has been a partner teacher of our cross-cultural exchange project, *Project Ibunka* since 2006. In September of this year he invited me to tell how I started Project Ibunka, and I hope that what follows will help your members and guests understand our project. Additionally, perhaps we will someday have the chance to meet on the web.

Sincerely,
Masahito Watanabe

"Ibunka" is a Japanese word that means "different cultures", and this is an international collaborative writing project I began in Japan at Yokohama National University just outside of Tokyo.

Ibunka is a cross-cultural e-mail exchange project among several international institutions using a dedicated web-based bulletin board interaction system. Every year, I post a call for participation onto several mailing lists or web-forums for teachers of English as a foreign or second language, such as TESL-L, TESLCA-L, Euro CALL, IECC, etc. I request the following of our partner teachers:

1. create groups of students (usually five or six groups)
2. send me names and e-mail addresses of participating students (we of course keep this information private)
3. take the pictures of students for their system profiles

When I started the project in 2000, it took a lot of time and labor to collect the partner schools, since teachers had little information on how the project would work. However, over time it has become easier not just through my experience with the project, but also because a number of the teachers are joining the project year after year. Annually, I compile project CDs that record all the interaction on the project every year. They are available to every teacher who is interested in the project, and helps them get a clear image of what is involved in the project.

The number of students and postings has increased each year as the following table shows:

| year | countries | participants | postings |
|------|--|--------------|----------|
| 2000 | 4: Germany, Australia, UK, and Japan | 109 | 777 |
| 2001 | 6: Germany, Finland, China, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan | 240 | 835 |
| 2002 | 5: Mexico, USA, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan | 252 | 1317 |
| 2003 | 5: U.S, Taiwan, Korea, China, Burkina Faso, and Japan | 392 | 1405 |
| 2004 | 7: Mexico, Taiwan, Korea, Burkina Faso, Namibia, Indonesia, and Japan | 344 | 1582 |
| 2005 | 9: Mexico, Indonesia, Namibia, UAE, Burkina Faso, Taiwan, Korea, Brazil, and Japan | 386 | 1778 |
| 2006 | 9: Indonesia, USA, UAE, Kazakhstan, Taiwan, China, Burkina Faso, Korea, and Japan | 301 | 1367 |
| 2007 | 9: Indonesia, USA, Taiwan, China, Argentina, Namibia, Burkina Faso, Korea, and Japan | 459 | 2704 |
| 2008 | 8: Indonesia, USA, Taiwan, Denmark, UAE, Burkina Faso, Korea, and Japan | 730 | 5007 |

Table 1

Topics and Discussion Schedule

Project Ibunka usually runs twelve weeks, starting in October and ending in December. During the project, partner students have three main phases of discussion and one extra activity. We have the following discussion schedule:

(1)

School life (for one month)

Goal: exchange short self introduction and messages on school lives (Postings: write messages with 150 or more words, comments with 100 or more words)

Cultures (for one month)

Goal: learn about various aspects of partner students' local cultures, such as festivals, towns, food, holidays, families, etc. (Postings: write messages with 200 or more words, comments with 100 or more words)

Social Issues - World Peace (for one month)

Goal: make interaction on the existing social issues such as juvenile crimes, environmental issues, regional conflicts in the world, etc. (Postings: write with 250 or more words, comments with 150 or more words)

Special Work for Commemorating the Project (for one month, simultaneous with the activity)

Goal: create a video-letter and exchange among partner schools

Since every school has its own schedule, the schedule plan above is often modified in consideration of local needs and the progress of the discussions.

Management in Project Ibunka

Different schools participate in the project with different goals. Among them are improving writing skills, understanding different cultures, giving students the chance to communicate with peers around the globe, and providing a self-learning tool for communication. Our project can be diagrammed as in Figure 1 on the next page. Compare this with Figure 2, which depicts many

ordinary online projects which have unified objectives. As you can see from this comparison, *Project Ibunka* has rather loose management.

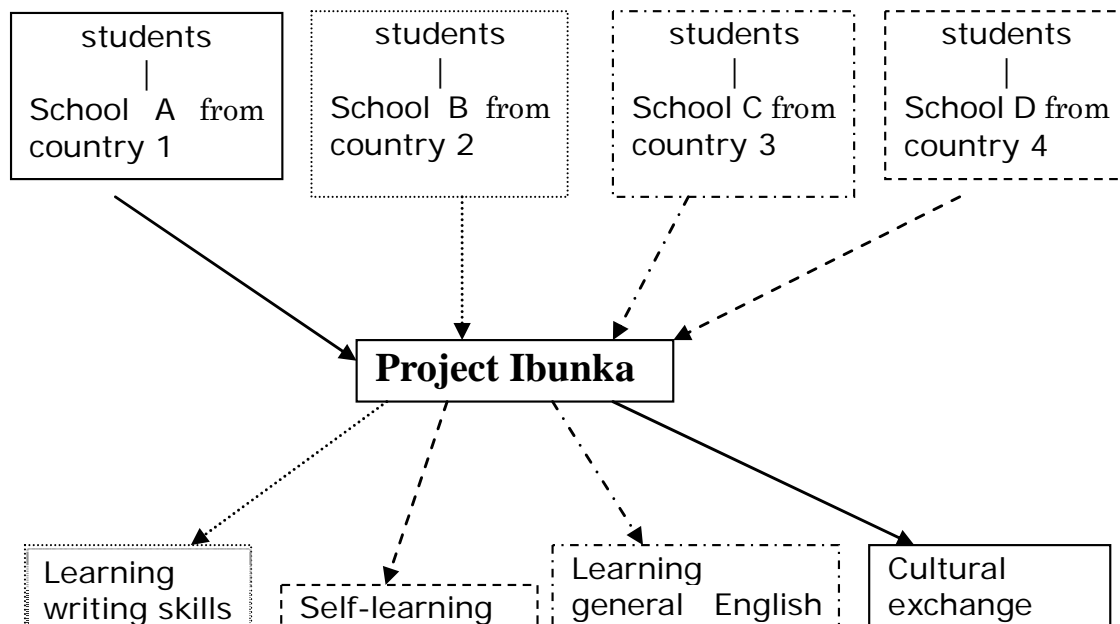


Figure 1

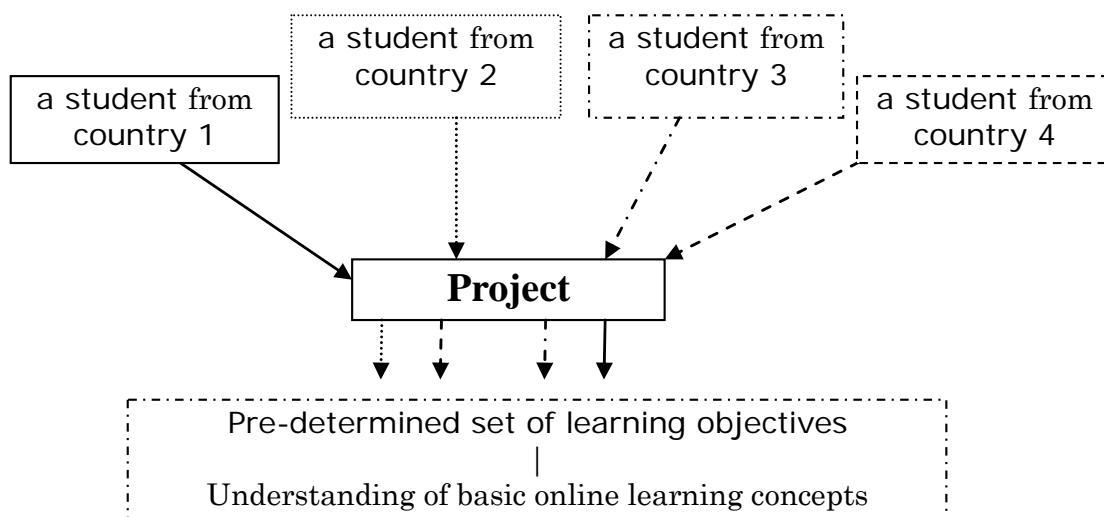


Figure 2

The WBB

Project Ibunka depends heavily on the "WBB" (Web Bulletin Board) System where students from different cultural backgrounds meet. It has the following features:

(2)

- i) Password-protected: Only registered users can login to the system. This keeps all the personal information safe from unauthorized access from the outside.
- ii) Anonymous: When students post their message, their real name and e-mail address will be shown with their own picture. They cannot be anonymous in WBB as can be in most of the other Internet discussion boards. This makes the virtual space on the Internet close to the real face-to-face classroom environment and makes students more responsible for their postings. As the system is password-protected, students have a safe environment to interact.
- iii) Two modes of discussion: When the board is group-based, students can post their messages to the board of their own group. Thus, if a student belongs to Group 1, he/she can read and post messages on the Group 1 board. When it is open, students can freely view and post messages irrespective of their own groups.
- iv) The first theme, "School Life" is group-based. I set up boards of discussion for each of our partner schools. Each partner school hosts a board where the students of the school post their essays about their school life and invite comments from partner students of different schools.
- v) On the other hand, the second and the third themes, "Cultures" and "Social Issues" are open. The following are the sub-themes of these two themes:

Cultures:

- Events and Sports
- Entertainment
- Family
- Education
- Humanistic Activities
- Miscellaneous

Social Issues – World Peace:

- International Political Issues
- Crimes
- Educational Issues
- Family and Human Issues
- Economic Issues

Health and Disease
Environmental Issues
Miscellaneous

- vi) The group-based mode enhances the socializing process since all the participants are divided into small groups. Open mode helps to view a richer variety of postings.
- vii) Automatic threading: If students respect the correct steps to post their replies, all of them are automatically indented to the original postings. This helps them to understand the threading relationship among the postings. Students can give any subject line they like to their message when they make comments. They do not have to follow the convention of inserting "Re:" phrase in front of their subject line when they reply.
- viii) Synchronous communication space: WBB provides a chat room (Café). Students can easily view participants' pictures from the link. Although there are substantial time differences among the partner schools, several official chat sessions are held regularly.

Other Support for Learning and Interaction

Participants can access supportive information from the web-site.

- i) Postings from teachers
In addition to the bulletin boards for interaction, participants can access various instructional postings from their teachers. Only partner teachers can both post and read messages, while students can only read them. Participants can access this information on the site's opening page.
- ii) Project Newsletters
Since 2001, I have been issuing weekly project newsletters. They contain 1) project news and discussion schedule, 2) various tips for better writing, 3) publication of good postings of the week, 4) supplementary reading input for the current theme, etc. This helps create productive threads of messages. Since we usually have more than one hundred postings per a week, it is quite difficult for a student to get his/her posting cited on the newsletter.

World CALL 2008, Fukuoka, Japan

Last year, a global academic conference on computer assisted language learning, World CALL 2008, was held in Fukuoka, Japan. Project partner teachers, Ms. Su-hsun Tsai (Taiwan), Ms. Nam-sook Chung (South Korea), Ms. Naoko Kasami (Japan), Ms. Vera Menezes (Brazil) and I organized a symposium about Project Ibunka. All of the five members actually met for the first time. We rehearsed the symposium several times and completed it successfully, agreeing that Project Ibunka has contributed significantly to each of our academic research.

Meeting Face to Face

In 2007 and 2008, Mr. Nurdin Somantri, Indonesia, organized a school tour to Japan. They visited my university, Yokohama National University and performed Indonesian songs, dances, and plays in front of Japanese students.

Joining Project Ibunka

We are always interested in finding partner schools that wish to participate in our project. Please consider sharing information on Ibunka with teachers working with Interact Clubs connected to your Rotary Clubs. You and they are welcome to contact me at wata33@gmail.com for further information.

Thank you again for taking time to learn about Project Ibunka.



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