

# The Changing Role of Grade One, Two, and Three Teachers as an Innovative Computer Project Is Implemented



Project members work together on computers.

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In 1998, the Saskatoon Board of Education installed a networked computer in every grade one, two, and three classroom in the school division. It was the first experience many teachers at this grade level had with using the Internet and e-mail in their classrooms. Several teachers from different schools came together with a consultant and resource person to form a research and support group. Their computer skills varied from advanced to minimal, but all were committed to improving their teaching practice using computer technology. In meetings and conversations over the course of a school year, the group examined the experiences, ideas, and strategies of its members in using networked computers in their classrooms. Over time the group coalesced into a virtual learning community on-line.

The teachers met at intervals to engage in reflective dialogue. A literature review provided by the consultant helped to generate the focus for research and discussion activities. In the later stages of the project, a group e-mail service called OneList was organized so that the teachers could preview discussion questions prior to their meetings and seek assistance with technological and other problems. Research diaries, teachers' notes, e-mail messages, and meeting transcripts were used to collect data about the teachers' experiences during the school year. Four themes emerged from an analysis of this data:

## 1. Teachers and Change

The steep learning curve of computing technology, in combination with the lack of time

in a working week, presents a forbidding task to many teachers new to the use of computers in the classroom. The task is made more difficult in that there are really two tasks: developing personal skills, and then developing expertise in using computers in meaningful ways with students. Facing difficult learning situations, uneven support, unknown technical challenges, and uncertain outcomes, many teachers are not prepared to take the risk of committing to sustained effort in learning to use the technology in the classroom.

## 2. What Worked

Group members shared with each other the types of activities they were using in their classrooms. These activities included familiarizing students with various pieces of software, providing them with daily computer communications in the form of jokes, weather reports or news items, using the computer as a learning centre, doing computerized report cards, sending letters through e-mail, creating multi-media presentations, developing web pages, doing research from Internet sources, and finding games and puzzles that were stimulating and fun.

## 3. The Challenges

The teachers experienced problems in using the computer that related to lack of time, lack of training, hardware and software problems, inadequate technical supports, the limitations imposed by one computer per classroom, and the absence of an overall vision for using technology to enhance learning.

## 4. Our Support Network

At the end, we felt we had developed a learning community - based on collegial support and dialog. We shared experiences, hopes, fears, failures, and successes. We taught each other about our individual situations and perceptions. We learned skills and information from each other, in some cases accomplishing things with computers that we had never tried before - and would likely not have tried without the support of the research group.

*Along with the thrill of having a personal computer in our classrooms came a feeling of responsibility. We had to live up to and justify the placement of these computers in the hands of primary teachers.*

*Teachers in this study repeatedly mentioned the importance of time. The lack of time in the day to get to the computer, the lack of time in our lives to learn and practice new skills, the length of time required to develop and master new instructional approaches, the time required for useful professional development, and the time required away from the classroom for meaningful dialogue. Finding ways to ease the burden of time for teachers is not unique to the area of technological innovation, but it was an acute problem for us.*