

Chapter 16

Integrated Cross–Cultural Virtual Classroom Exchange Program: How Adaptable Public Schools are in Korea and the USA?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As information and communication technology (ICT) evolves, the scope of social interactions expands globally through the Web, and knowledge has become a key source for economic production. The capacity to understand diverse cultures and the ability to utilize ICT for knowledge acquisition and application have become critical to increasing and sustaining global solidarity, peace and development. Accordingly, society expects educational institutions to provide students with cultural learning opportunities and ICT skills. In an effort to address these issues, a cross-cultural virtual classroom exchange program using an online course management system was introduced to public schools in Korea and the USA. By investigating technological, pedagogical, and organizational factors, this paper analyzes the adaptability of public schools in Korea and the USA with respect to integrating cross-cultural virtual exchange activities within their respective curricula. Ultimately, this case recommends solutions for increasing adaptability, and invites international collaboration among education stakeholders to disseminate the cross-cultural virtual learning worldwide.

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ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND: PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND ICT POLICY

The Republic of Korea (South Korea)'s public K-12 schools are composed of six-year elementary schools, three-year middle schools, and three-year high schools. The K-12 curriculum is centralized at the national level. Since 1954, the Korean Ministry of Education (currently renamed as Ministry of Education, Science and Technology: MEST) has developed and advanced the national curriculum every eight to ten years. The centralized national curriculum reflects the governments' political and economic stances. For example, the government put great emphasis on education as an engine of the nation's economic growth in the 1970's. Diverse research and reports have disclosed the power of Korea's education as related to its rapid economic development (Korea Education & Research Information Service, 2008; Morris, 1996; UNESCO, 1993). Accordingly, science, mathematics, and technical education have been core subjects. Since 1997, with an emphasis on globalization, the English language has been taught from the third grade and has become one of the biggest interests of Korean society.

By providing the vision for adapting education to the Information Age (Korea Education & Research Information Service, 2000), MEST has directed educators to participate in and follow school innovation using ICT. There is a very structured and linear connection between the central department of education, local office of education, and each level of public schools.

The policies for the informatization of education were introduced in two stages. In the First Comprehensive Plan (1997-2000), all elementary and middle schools were provided with ICT hardware, one PC with high-speed Internet connection, a large screen TV projector per every classroom, and one or two computer laboratories. The Second Stage Plan started in 2001 and focused on developing ICT software, such as digital online content materials. The Korean Education & Research Information Service (KERIS) led the development of ICT content material and its distribution. KERIS also supplied ICT resources for teachers and students including cyber learning services and the promotion of public education through the Internet (KERIS, 2004).

The central administration and its policy systematically planned and supported the provision of public schools' ICT equipment and contents materials. Since funding amounts were based on school size, i.e., the number of students, classrooms, and facilities, all public schools in Korea were set up equally with ICT infrastructures (KERIS, 2001). The plan for adapting ICT in elementary and secondary education has been continuously implemented. Emphasizing educational welfare and information culture, MEST has focused on "narrowing the education gap" since 2006. Also, MEST enacted Regulations for the Center of Safe On-line Learning,

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