A University/Community Partnership to Bridge the Digital Divide

David Ruppel  
The University of Toledo, USA

Cynthia Ruppel  
The University of Alabama in Huntsville, USA

INTRODUCTION

Companies want employees with core values who ascribe to corporate values. Emotional intelligence (EQ) is used by companies in recruitment (Foote, 2001), and guides managers in dealing with team performance problems. Similarly, leadership requires refocusing on core values, which over time builds character (Badaracco, 1998). Thus, educational institutions should devote considerable attention to character building (Foote, 2001).

Service-learning is designed to help. Jacoby (1996a, p. 5) has defined service-learning as “…a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development”.

Service-learning is important in information technology where students need technical skills and experience, and a strong ethical foundation. Legal aspects of technology have not kept pace with technology; often IT people are confronted with complex ethical decisions. It has been argued that service-learning represents a “unique pedagogy…that enhances the ability of private sector managers to be effective stewards of society’s moral authority” (Godfred, p. 364). Service-learning in colleges is tightly linked with K-12 education (Jacoby, 1996B) due to the growing number of at-risk children, a vested interest for colleges to improve the future students, and because students will view service-learning as an appropriate college activity if they benefited from it prior to college (Jacoby, 1996b).

A policy concern in the information age is the “digital divide,” a gap between those who have easy access to technology and those who do not. References are made to information “haves” and “have-nots” in an age where information is equivalent to wealth (Holloway, 2000). The “have-nots” are in danger of exclusion from the new economy and marginalization into low-wage jobs (Dunham, 1999). In 2000, the President of the United States asked the IT community to help close this digital divide for moral reasons and to ensure that the economy flourishes with the availability of skilled workers (Shewmake, 2000).

This overview summarizes a five-phase service-learning project accomplished through a partnership between the University of Toledo and a local K-8 parochial/non-profit school. The students were primarily enrolled in a Systems Analysis, Design and Implementation course (SAD). This longitudinal project was undertaken to plan, design, and wire a network for the school and to assess and implement continuing and future computer needs. It allowed students to gain “real-life” experience while contributing to the growth of IT among children in a non-profit setting.

BACKGROUND

The school is a parochial school enrolling approximately 200-250 students. All grades have a dedicated classroom; a computer lab and library are also provided.

Existing computers consisted of a classroom set of older Macintosh computers in the 8th grade room. Each classroom had an older Macintosh computer for the teacher, all with unused LAN capability. The computer lab contained older Apple computers used in the primary grades for computer literacy and keyboarding skills.

Phase 1

The school had accumulated technology funds and hired a teacher with a Master’s degree in Educational Technology. The teacher and principal agreed to participate in the project since an estimate from a local company exceeded the funds accumulated. While the teacher had pedagogic knowledge of computers, he did not possess the expertise to evaluate the quotation or analyze the technical aspects of the network. The school indicated that it hoped to apply for a grant, but needed technical information.

Students self-selected into the project: The goal of the project was to educate themselves as to alternatives, costs and provide background information concerning networking to prepare a grant application. They had the opportunity to examine the existing environment and interview stakeholders.