

# Meeting Needs of Refugee Children and Preservice Teachers through Educational Technology

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# Purpose of the Study

This session describes a pilot program at the University of North Florida.

It brought preservice teachers and refugee children together to serve the educational needs of the children and to prepare the preservice teachers to use technology with children who were new to American schools.

The program personally connected the preservice teachers with students in area schools, a key strategy for improving the use of technology in K-12 schools.

# Project Overview

*Preservice teacher education students in an introductory educational technology course **configured surplus university computers and then gave them to local refugee children and their families.***

The twelve students heard the stories of eight families who had recently arrived in the city from Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Liberia, and Burma, to become familiar with the educational needs of the children.

# Rationale

As of 2004, the US was by far the largest of the 10 traditional resettlement countries for refugees, having resettled 73,851 refugees

Florida ranks fourth in states taking in the largest percentage of refugees resettled in the U.S. and took in over 19,000 refugees in 2004

In order for education for refugees to succeed, teachers must understand the experiences and cultures of refugee children and must welcome them without discrimination

# Rationale

To help refugees overcome their obstacles to success:

1. social services are needed to facilitate adjustment
2. language instruction is needed by students and their parents
3. discrimination should be minimized

The pilot project worked toward two of the three obstacles:

assistance with learning English,  
and combating discrimination among teachers

# Theoretical Framework

The focus on refugee children:

The digital and pedagogical divides influence the achievement of students from economically disadvantaged homes.

While they have less access to computers at school and at home, they appear to benefit academically when they develop technological skill and use computers for academic work at home.

Refugees are among the more disadvantaged citizens in the community and refugee children may benefit dramatically from a home computer.

# Theoretical Framework

The learning of the preservice teachers:

Meaningful learning is *active, constructive, intentional, and authentic*. It “includes reciprocal intention—action—reflection activities,” as proposed in Jonassen’s (2000, p. v) activity theory, and occurs when learners make meaning in the context of solving novel problems.

A second source guiding the study centered on the need to foster social justice as it relates to the purposes for public schooling.

# Computer Configuration

Eight surplus Pentium 3 computers with Windows XP and flat screen monitors

New headphones, speakers, and power strips

Educational video, electronic books, free software, and tutorials for computer use located or developed by the teacher education students.



*Student Voices: I wanted to be able to provide these families with the same opportunities as everyone else.*

# Computer Delivery

In small groups, the students visited each home to set up the computers and assist the children in getting started with the hardware, software, and media.

Visits were facilitated by the resettlement agency liaisons.



*Student Voices: It was very new and different watching someone learn how to use a computer for the first time.*

# Educational Outcomes

The preservice teachers to built their skills and expertise—from *knowing about* effective uses of technology to experiencing *the use of* technology by real children across grade levels, subject areas, and cultures.

The students began to understand first-hand the multicultural richness in the community they would soon serve as teachers and to appreciate the value of technology as a key to the success of an entire family



**Student Voices:** *The children's mother thanked us repeatedly for what we had done, and provided a meal for us (which, I think, is an Afghan tradition).*

# Educational Outcomes

## Active learning.

The skills demonstrated and the materials produced by all of the students indicated active learning that occurred during the course.

Students interacted regularly with technology resources, information sources, and standards as they made decisions about materials to include on the computers for each family.



*Student Voices: My favorite part of the project was delivering them. The two families I went to were so nice, and so thankful. I enjoyed seeing two very different cultures.*

# Educational Outcomes

## **Constructive learning.**

The students' notions of technology-supported teaching developed.

They arrived in the course with a relatively naïve and superficial understanding of technology as a container for facts encountered while learning, i.e. word processors and presentation software, and then focused more on technology for generating and expressing ideas, i.e. concept mapping, multimedia production, and synthesizing web-based information.



*Student Voices: It was very new and different watching someone learn how to use a computer for the first time.*

# Educational Outcomes

## **Intentional learning.**

Student time, interactions, and effort focused on solving the problem of equitable access to educational tools.

The processes of acquiring and applying technology skills and content knowledge were facilitated by the outcome of providing computers for families.

Because the students were not focused on an abstract group of children they would teach years in the future, but on real families, their intentions were based on concrete and immediate needs.

# Educational Outcomes

## **Authentic learning.**

For most of the students, it was the first experience designing materials for K-12 learners and designing materials and lessons that integrate technology for learning.

They witnessed the power of technology to change the lives of people on the other side of the digital divide.



*Student Voices: Although it was somewhat difficult, I felt it was all worth it when I saw the smile on the girl's face who received the computer*

## Family Follow-up

**The resettlement agency reports that in the past year:**

**“All families are very pleased with the computers. Some uses include looking at news articles in their home languages, listening to music, research for school reports, typing school reports, games, and applying for Department of Children and Families benefits online.**

**The majority of them did get internet and have been enjoying it greatly. One family even has a ‘community computer,’ meaning she allows many others to use it because they are without one. This whole project greatly benefited the 8 families.”**

# Paper and Slides

<http://www.unf.edu/~c.cavanaugh>