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“You don’t have to be young to learn about technology. You have to feel young,” Vint Cerf, a computer scientist most often credited with “creating” the Internet, shared in an April 2008 interview with *Esquire* magazine.

Well, I don’t always feel young, but I am relatively comfortable with today’s technology. You see, I live in a house full of men, so that means there’s no lack of gadgets. iPods, game systems, laptops, PCs, cell phones—we seem to have them all.

I have created dozens of playlists on my computer so I am never without my favorite music, and I am no longer taken aback when my virtual Wii Fit personal trainer remarks that she hasn’t seen me for several days or that I must be snacking a bit more than usual.

She does manage to make me feel guilty, however. And that, in turn, causes me to work out with greater effort (although not always more enthusiasm).

Which brings me to the topic of technology and learning. If I can learn yoga from a virtual woman on a game system, what’s next? What will learning look like 10 years from now? Vint Cerf commented in the *Esquire* interview: “I’d like to know what the Internet is going to look like in 2050. Thinking about it makes me wish I were eight years old.”

Taking a step into that future, this issue of *Middle Ground* highlights some of the innovative ways educators are leveraging the power of today’s technology to take teaching and learning to the next level.

I hope you will find food for thought, strategies you can use in your school and classroom, and inspiration to share your own successes with your colleagues. It’s truly an exciting time to be in education.

And please check out a new feature in Middle Ground: NMSA in Action. You will find a wealth of information about what’s going on at NMSA and with NMSA affiliates and members. Make special note of the preview of the NMSA Annual Conference, which will feature a broad look at technology in education.

PATRICIA GEORGE, EDITOR
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reputation cannot be blown out, but it often dies in the socket; a very few names may be considered as perpetual lamps that shine unconsumed.” –Samuel Johnson, English poet, critic, and writer, 1709–1784

I know that quote sounds a little stuffy and foreboding, but it certainly presents an image. As times change, it sometimes becomes important to transform the name we call something to better reflect its purpose, audience, and work—and so that we provide the avenue for increased growth and movement into the future.

To provide that avenue for National Middle School Association, the NMSA Board of Trustees suggested that it may be time to consider a name change to better reflect the association’s work and its members—now and in the future.

National Middle School Association and its name evolved from a group of United States university professors and researchers. Their goal was to promote an understanding of the developmental changes taking place in young adolescents and to reform the schools in which those students were being educated.

However, that was nearly 40 years ago, and much has changed since then. While the name, National Middle School Association, has served us well for 35 years, is it the right name to move us into the next 35 years? Just look at the topics of the articles in this issue of Middle Ground and you’ll see how far we’ve come. Who would have imagined 35 years ago that we would one day be discussing a digital revolution? And, it is hard to imagine where education and the association’s work will take us in the coming years.

This is not the first time the topic of a name change has been raised. In 2006, the NMSA Board of Trustees appointed a Visioning Task Force to look at many issues that could affect the work and growth of NMSA. One of that group’s recommendations to the Board of Trustees in January 2007 was to initiate a process to change the name of the association.

The group cited several reasons for the recommendation, but two were considered crucial:

• To clarify that NMSA provides support and resources to all who are working with young adolescents, no matter what the grade configuration. Because “middle school” is in our name, some assume that our interest is only in middle schools, and that is far from the truth. Our overriding interest is the education of all young adolescents, period.

• To recognize that while NMSA started in the heartland of the United States, we are no longer “national” in scope. We have members in 45 countries and strong affiliates in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe, so we are in fact an “international” organization.

The name of National Middle School Association belongs to our members, and members will make the ultimate decision about whether we change our name. Therefore, Task Force 2010 was appointed this year to establish a process to gain input from a vast audience about 1) whether we should change our name, 2) what that new name should be, and 3) how we should move from one name to the other. It’s anticipated that such a transition would happen in the year 2010—thus the name of the task force. Ultimately, members would decide through a vote during our annual election.

This column is one of the first steps in notifying our members about this discussion. We will be offering our members many opportunities to provide input into this decision, including surveys, focus groups, conversations, and an open invitation to provide your thoughts, ideas, and suggestions. We invite you to join the conversation and engage others in the discussion.

I recently saw the following quote by an unknown author: “Words have meaning and names have power.” Does the name, National Middle School Association, evoke the power necessary to positively influence the education of young adolescents wherever they live, wherever the go to school, to ensure that they can be whoever they want to be?

This is a “once in a lifetime” opportunity for most of us to affect an organization on a foundational level. We must decide who we are, what we are about, and how we will influence the future—and decide if the name that was chosen 35 years ago still burns as brightly as it did then.

—Betty Edwards, Executive Director
National Middle School Association
news to use

The Color Inside

*The Color Inside* is a story about race, black and white thinking, and perception. The author, Folwell Dunbar, originally conceived the book as a project for his seventh and eighth grade students. They were to write and illustrate an original poem about race using colorized black and white photographs. He created the book as a model, tapping into the talents of a former student, Zarouhie Abdalian, for illustrations.

The book is meant to be a springboard for discussions about how we really see the world and each other. The paperback is $14.18; the download is $5. All proceeds go to support New Schools for New Orleans (http://nsno.org/). Check it out at www.lulu.com/content/869571. And don’t miss Dunbar’s article on page 31 of this issue of *Middle Ground*.

Science and Current Events

Following in the wake of their Middle School Portal (http://msteacher.org), the folks at the National Science Digital Library (NSDL) have a new service for science teachers that should make it easy to blend current events into the regular curriculum. It’s a blog with the unwieldy but definitive name, “Connecting News to National Science Education Standards.”

Every Thursday, NSDL project staff link a current news article to related teaching resources that connect specific content standards to the event. Students may read the articles or they may serve as background knowledge for teachers to develop instructional activities.

The articles are geared toward grades 5–8 and include links to lessons, reference articles, and definitions. Sample the content at http://expertvoices.nsdl.org/connectingnews

Steeped in History

The National History Education Clearinghouse provides a central online location for accessing high-quality resources in K–12 U.S. history education. Explore the highlighted content on the home page (http://teachinghistory.org) or visit individual sections for best practices, teaching materials, issues and research, grants, and professional development.

Around the World

Looking for statistics about people and places around the world? Why not ask the folks at the Central Intelligence Agency? The CIA Web site, The World Fact Book, provides continually updated information about the history, government, geography, demographics, economy, transportation, current issues, and hundreds of other categories of information for every country from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe.

Learn everything you wanted to know at www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html

Get in the Tech Game

Education World offers a variety of Techtorials to help teachers use some aspect of technology in their classrooms. Presented by Lorrie Jackson, coordinator of instructional technology at Lausanne Collegiate School in Memphis, Tennessee, the Techtorials offer easy to follow, step-by-step instructions related to such areas as software applications, Internet use, computer maintenance and troubleshooting, and special interest technology.

Get started at www.education-world.com/a_tech/techtorial/techtorialintro.shtml

Save the Earth

The environment is a key topic in today’s society. The Environmental Protection Agency’s Make a Difference campaign is aimed at educating and engaging young people in resource conservation and environmental protection. It encourages young people to make informed decisions to help protect the environment.

A resource kit entitled “Your Life, Your World, Your Choices” inspires youth to reduce, reuse, and recycle to make a difference at home, at school, and in their communities.

The kit, geared toward young adolescents, includes the following:
- A collection of solid waste resources on CD-ROM.
- “Greenscaping Your Lawn and Garden” booklet.
- “Let’s Go Green Shopping” booklet.
- “The Life Cycle of a CD/DVD” poster, “The Life Cycle of a Cell Phone” poster, and “The Life Cycle of a Soccer Ball” poster that depict the life cycle of these items and explain the importance of reuse and recycling.
• “The New Wave in Electronics: eCycling” brochure that provides information about how to dispose of old or unwanted electronic equipment without throwing it away.
• “Pack a Waste-Free Lunch” poster that helps students learn how to reduce, reuse, and recycle items in their school lunches.
• “Science Fair Fun—Designing Environmental Science Projects” booklet.
• “Service Learning: Education Beyond the Classroom” booklet.
• “Tools to Reduce Waste in Schools” guide to help schools and school districts implement new, or expand upon existing, waste reduction programs.
• “You Can Make a Difference: Learn About Careers in Waste Management” flyer.

You can order the kit in a variety of ways. Visit www.epa.gov/epaoswer/education/mad.htm for information.

Did You Hear?

LearnOutLoud, based in Santa Monica, California, wants to promote the use of audio and video educational material for personal and professional development. To do that, the company provides access to free audio and video learning resources including free audio books, lectures, speeches, and more.

For example, listeners can hear the audio of Martin Luther King, Jr’s “I Have a Dream” speech, watch the CNN-YouTube Presidential Debates, listen to The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, and watch a podcast of Technology in K–12 Lesson Plans, presented by folks at the University of South Florida.

LearnOutLoud also has a special area for kids that features audio and video content for all ages.

Titles are also available for purchase. Visit www.learnoutloud.com and start listening.

Technology in Small Districts

Small school districts often face unique challenges related to technology implementation. Recognizing this, the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN), in conjunction with a grant from SRI International and support from the National Technologies Activities contract with the U. S. Department of Education, created a Small District Technology Leadership wiki to provide a place where educators in small districts with student populations of 2,500 or less can work collaboratively around effective planning for and implementation of technology.

Users can access resources provided by CoSN and other sources and contribute to the site by adding their own best practices, tips, strategies, case studies, and resources. While the focus is on small districts, the content is relevant for districts of all sizes.

Check out the wiki at www.cosn.org/wiki/index.php?title=Main_Page

Taking Another Path to Technology

“There’s no one path to the school of tomorrow.” That’s the theme of School 2.0, a Web site designed to help educators develop a common vision of the school of the future while exploring the various ways to make that school a reality.

The site, produced by The Center for Technology in Learning at SRI International, offers information and inspiration through a Learning Ecosystem, an interactive map that illustrates a variety of scenarios that utilize technology in the school; Leadership Resources, a searchable library of Web resources to support professional development; a Reflection Tool that stimulates thinking; a Bandwidth Calculator to help plan implementation; and a Transformation Toolkit of materials to get the conversation going among stakeholders.

Get started on the path at http://etoolkit.org/etoolkit/about

Following Rosa and Ernesto

Immigration and social and environmental issues in Latin America are woven into a new “teaching novel” for elementary and middle school teachers and students. Los Viajes de Rosa y Ernesto (Rosa and Ernesto’s Journeys) was written by Rita Wirkala, a professor of Spanish language and culture at the University of Washington for her own students, and centers on the story of two young adolescents from Latin America who face many of the same challenges that today’s young immigrants face.

Preview Rosa y Ernesto at www.allbilingual.com. NMSA members may purchase the book, with or without the audio book, at a discount. Contact orders@allbilingual.com for information.
Advocacy in Action

Learning, collaboration, and advocacy were the key topics at the National Middle School Association Board of Trustee’s recent meeting in Washington, D.C. Your association’s board has been engaged throughout the past year in a wide variety of reading and discussion to advise the writing of a new strategic plan for NMSA. This learning continued with presentations by Andreas Schleicher from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development who spoke about the most recent PISA results. Vivien Stewart from Asia Society spoke on the need for the globalization of American schools. Charles Hiteshew from America’s Promise shared information about their work in addressing the needs of America’s youth and the dropout crisis. In the spirit of collaboration, representatives from several other educational associations joined board members for these discussions. These conversations helped identify both challenges and opportunities facing our country and our schools.

The following day, the NMSA Board hit the Hill. The morning began with a meeting at the U.S. Department of Education followed by board members visiting their legislators armed with information about NMSA, Success in the Middle, and state ACT results. Board members saw first-hand that interest in the middle level is alive in D.C. Legislators and aides expressed genuine interest in experiences from “back home,” and the belief that advocacy is crucial was reinforced. Evidently our efforts paid off. Within a few days of the visits, we’ve had three new co-sponsors for Success in the Middle and three new co-sponsors for Striving Readers.

The day ended at the Capitol building with the presentation of the NMSA Distinguished Service Award to Rep. Raúl Grijalva (AZ) and Sen. Barack Obama (IL). These legislators were honored for the leadership demonstrated by sponsoring the Success in the Middle Act. Rep. John Yarmuth (KY) also visited with the board to discuss the Striving Readers Act. The day ended with discussions with key legislative aides from the offices of Senators Alexander (TN), Kennedy (MA), Enzi (WY), Murray (WA), Sessions (AL), Reed (RI), Whitehouse (RI) and Reid (NV), and Representatives Miller (CA), Yarmuth (KY), and Holt (NJ). Each of these members of Congress has played an important role in furthering the education agenda and bringing much needed attention to the middle level.

The NMSA Board left Washington, D.C., armed with new knowledge, a renewed commitment to collaboration, and the belief that advocating for the middle level must be a top priority for the future.
It’s About the Bigs and Littles

For most seventh and eighth graders it’s not cool to have a big brother or a big sister around. They want to be independent and self-sufficient. They want to have their parents drop them off around the corner from the school rather than at the front door. But the students at Shaw Middle School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, are excited when their Big Brothers and Big Sisters come to school.

Shaw Middle School has participated in the Big Brothers Big Sisters School-Based Mentoring program for four years, serving about 70 students in one-to-one mentoring relationships, roughly 20% of the school’s total student body.

“Our kids are proud to have their Big Brothers and Big Sisters come around,” said Charlie Hall, the liaison for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southeastern Pennsylvania and Shaw Middle School. “They are proud to have them and proud to show them off.”

School-Based Mentoring is the fastest growing form of mentoring in America today and Big Brothers Big Sisters has 125,000 volunteers in over 6,000 schools each year. Big Brothers Big Sisters promotes one-to-one youth mentoring, creating meaningful relationships between caring adult volunteers (Bigs) and children in need (Littles). Through this program, volunteers are matched with children at school where they spend an hour a week together, taking part in activities like board games, shooting hoops, homework, or just talking.

Hall says it’s the time spent just “hanging out” that makes the most difference. “I could see that the program was successful when the Bigs and Littles were just there to share with each other,” said Hall. “Just to hang out, not necessarily work on school things.” It was at that point that it was clear a true relationship had been formed.

What one-to-one youth mentoring creates is a relationship between the Big and the Little, giving the Little guidance and support, and making a positive impact on his or her life. Hall believes that it’s the knowledge that there is someone else looking out for the Littles and rooting for them that makes all the difference.

And teachers at Shaw Middle School feel the same way.

“Having a shoulder to cry on, words of wisdom, a high-five for success—these students need that,” says Krissy Walrath, a teacher at Shaw Middle School.

Participation in the program also benefits students’ schoolwork and behavior. According to a recent study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters School-Based Mentoring program, students enrolled are less likely to skip school and have fewer infractions, like fighting or trips to the principal’s office, than those without Bigs. Little’s school assignments were also of higher quality and turned in more often than children without mentors, and they increased their academic performance in written and oral language. The program is making a difference and the schools and students are benefiting from it.

For more information visit BigBrothersBigSisters.org

More than 9,000 educators who work with young adolescents will gather in Denver, Colorado, to share the most current research and best practices in middle level education. The 35th National Middle School Association Annual Conference and Exhibit (NMSA08) offers the best professional development available for any educator who works with kids in grades 5 to 9. With more than 500 sessions in over 40 topics, the conference truly has something for everybody.

NMSA08 will highlight the challenge that educators face in today’s digital age. Alan November will facilitate the opening general session, focusing on the challenges and featuring successes of schools and teachers that are using a wide variety of technologies in their teaching and learning. “We have the responsibility to prepare our students for a world that is constantly changing, and for jobs that we have not even dreamed of yet,” says November. Also, learn how to move yourself and your school from “good to great” from keynoter Jim Collins, and hear actress Marlee Matlin talk about helping children reach their potential.

In addition to strands on the characteristics of This We Believe, there will be a technology strand of presentations throughout the conference and attendees will also get to play in technology “sand boxes” throughout the public areas of the Colorado Convention Center. At these “sand boxes” you will see technologies in action and get hands-on experience.

Attendees will also have the opportunity in the exhibit hall to network with over 350 education companies offering the newest, most innovative products and educational services available. You can experience the “21st Century Classroom,” a structure designed and built to allow students and teachers to make full use of technology across the curriculum.

Visit www.nmsa.org/annual to find out more about this Oct 30 – Nov 1, 2008 event.
The Digital Learning Farm

By Alan November
Years ago, when farms dominated our landscape, children were responsible for performing meaningful jobs that were vital to each family’s success. Depending on their age, children would care for animals, repair farm equipment, prepare food to sell at local markets, and more. Children were essential to the very survival of the family. At the same time, these jobs taught children the value of hard work, leading them to become more productive citizens within their communities.

As mechanized tools and other advances developed, the work of children was replaced. To prepare for the industrial economy, students were required to attend school where teachers became central figures and where children took on more passive roles within their communities. Children’s contributions to their community shifted to the responsibility of completing schoolwork. This continuing trend contradicts a fundamental human need that draws us to make contributions to our communities.

We have come full circle as globalization quickly becomes the norm, and it may now be essential for our students to compete with peers from around the world. Today, we can restore the dignity and integrity of the child as a contributor.

Across the country, pioneering teachers are providing students with new roles that have students contributing to their learning communities. We have powerful, easy-to-use tools such as screencasting and podcasting that give students opportunities to contribute content to the class. At the same time, we also can provide them with rigorous and more motivating assignments and better prepare them to become more productive in our new global economy. It’s an exciting time.

The six jobs described here outline creative ways that your students can make valuable contributions to their learning community. While these jobs can be successfully implemented individually, it is in bringing them together in harmony that we can create a more balanced vision of teaching and learning.

**Tutorial Designers**

Students from Lincoln Middle School in Santa Monica, California, have energized their school through the use of screencasted tutorials. Under the leadership of their teacher, Eric Marcos, these kids have begun documenting their learning by recording themselves solving problems based on material discussed in class. Marcos has been using Camtasia (www.techsmith.com) with his class to allow students to record the actions being performed on their computer screens while also recording their explanations about how to solve each problem. When completed, these movies are uploaded and become part of an online database that Marcos’ students—and anyone else around the world—can access at any time.

Another option by TechSmith that is free and equally as powerful is Jing (www.jingproject.com). With this software, and a single click of the mouse, students can begin recording their work easily and at any time.

Marcos has found this task to be so motivating that he has worked to build a new YouTube-like Web site (www.mathtrain.tv) that he and the rest of his school’s math department use to share the growing number of screencasts that students are creating. He says that allowing students to create material for this site increases engagement and provides struggling students with more opportunities for reviewing troubling concepts.
**Official Scribes**

Do all of your students take excellent notes every day? What if there were online tools that would give your students the opportunity to collaboratively build one set of perfect notes? Using a shared blog, wiki, or another collaborative writing tool like Google Docs (http://docs.google.com) students can share this responsibility and create a detailed set of notes that the entire class can use.

Darren Kuropatwa, a high school calculus teacher, has transformed his classroom from individual students working on “their stuff” to a collaborative learning community. His “scribe of the day” program (http://adifference.blogspot.com/2006/11/distributed-teaching-and-learning_21.html) has been a great success. Each day, a new student is responsible for taking notes and collecting diagrams that become part of his class’ online calculus textbook.

Kuropatwa reports that students who never took notes in the past are now doing so, knowing that their peers depend on what is published on the class blog. At the same time, students who struggle to take good notes are getting better as they see constant high-quality models being posted by their peers.

**Researchers**

Many classrooms have one computer sitting in the back that gets very little use. What if that computer became the official research station where one student each day was responsible for finding answers to all the questions in class—including the teacher’s?

This might not sound imaginative, but it can be very effective. Each day, assign a different student to sit by that computer. When questions come up during class, it is that student’s responsibility to search out the correct answer. Once sites are found that give details about the questions being asked, you might consider adding those sites to your own search engine built using Google’s Custom Search Engine creator (www.google.com/coop/cse/).

This search engine can be designed to meet standards, coordinate with your curriculum, and include sites from reputable resources. Imagine creating a Global Warming Search Engine that cuts through the hype on both sides of the issue and only accesses factual information from NASA, NOAA, and other scientific research organizations.

Don’t expect this to work easily right from the beginning. Most educators know that there is a great amount of misinformation online and acknowledge that students don’t always use the most effective search techniques. Understanding this makes this student job that much more important. We should be providing students with guided opportunities and teachable moments that allow them to practice and hone their research skills.

**Collaboration Coordinators**

Not long ago it was cost prohibitive to have your class connect with other classes and subject experts around the world. That time is gone! In an ever-shrinking world, we now have free access to make these very connections.

Using Skype (www.skype.com), a collaboration team could be responsible for establishing and maintaining working relationships with classrooms around the world via the Internet. How can you leverage that power?

Prior to a discussion of the American Revolution, charge your collaboration team with finding a class of British students who would be willing to interact with them concerning the issues that led to the start of the Revolutionary War. How many eyes do you think would be opened by the differing views that arise during the debate?

Connections can also be established with experts who might be willing to talk to your students regarding other meaningful topics. For example, middle school students from one Chicago suburb were learning about the effects of globalization. Their teacher, Andrea Trudeau, could have provided students with only a short passage from a textbook or a few magazine articles. Instead, she facilitated a project that had her students creating interview questions for an American factory owner who felt he had to outsource his production to China as well as a businessman in China who was managing a factory for the American market (http://dps109.wikispaces.com/Skype).

The questions the students developed became a part of a series of interviews that were recorded and provided students with a learning experience that went far beyond any textbook or article. This project attracted a global audience, including a teacher in the United Kingdom who repurposed this material with his class as they were discussing similar issues.

Hundreds of other opportunities like this are waiting for any adventurous group of students looking for opportunities to bring the world into the classroom.

**Contributing to Society**

It’s almost impossible to watch TV or listen to the radio today without hearing about issues in countries around the world. While they do seem distant, these issues are important, and we can use them to teach students about social justice and empathy.

Kiva (www.kiva.com) is one of today’s most important social responsibility Web sites. This site opens the doors of learning and gives students the opportunity to make a small but meaningful difference in the lives of others.

Through this site, your class can join others in making small loans to entrepreneurs in developing countries who are trying to make better lives for themselves and their families. These loans are repaid over time as students are kept up to date on the successes and struggles of those to whom they have invested contributions.

You might consider pulling together a team that searches out investments the class finds important and relates to their current...
studies. They might organize snack sales or penny drives while educating other classes about their mission. This team then works with the research team to investigate what is happening in these other parts of the world. They might work with the collaboration coordinators to find experts whom they can talk to about how loans work.

The learning cycle can go on and on as loans are repaid and reinvested. Your students can be tracking the results of their micro-investments long after the school year has ended.

Curriculum Reviewers

As the resources above come together, the curriculum review team jumps into action to create material that can be used for continuous review. This team combines visual and audio components into podcasts that can be posted online for individuals to download to their MP3 players.

Bob Sprankle and his class from Wells Elementary School in Wells, Maine, are quite well known for doing exactly this. Their Room 208 Podcast burst onto the scene several years ago and provided classes with a fantastic model that can be duplicated by others. Weekly, during their snack time, Sprankle’s students organized, recorded, and edited their podcasts before publishing them to a global audience (www.bobsprankle.com/podcasts/0506/room208/room208odcast.mov).

If you plan to attempt this, you may want to get your school to purchase a few inexpensive MP3 players that can be used by students who might not have their own. These devices can be loaded up at school with podcasts that cover multiple courses, and the material on these players can be accessed anywhere, at any time.

Leveraging the Tools

In some ways, the idea of the digital farm and the jobs outlined above is counter to the current policies of many schools where community tools are routinely blocked on the network. The opportunity before us is much too valuable for this to continue.

If our children are to grow up to make important contributions to our society, it is essential that we provide them with powerful tools and experiences across the curriculum. This will require a new culture of teaching and learning that engages students as contributors. Our students have already chosen tools such as MySpace and Facebook for their own communications and social interaction. Now is the time to take elements of these tools and provide students with the appropriate role models of how to use them to make important and rigorous contributions to their own school and beyond. If we do not teach students social responsibility and ethics, then our worst fears of children abusing these tools will come true.

Alan November is an international leader in education technology. He will be presenting at the NMSA Annual Conference in Denver this November. Learn more about Alan’s work and his Building Learning Communities Summer Conference at www.novemberlearning.com. © November Learning.

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Get on the Right Track!
Today’s middle school students are very different from young adolescents of just 10 years ago. Cell phones, instant messaging, digital cameras, MP3 players, social networking sites, and the Internet have completely changed the way students interact with each other and their parents.

Recognizing that this is a whole new breed, today’s best educators are using technology to advance learning by meeting students on their digital turf, using instructional strategies that allow students to be more self-directed in their learning and that promote more advanced critical thinking skills. Collaboration is commonplace and students take more responsibility for their learning because they are actively engaged in the process.

Did You Know?

With the influx of multimedia, computers, social networking sites, and electronic gaming, students are living and reacting to a digital world. Indeed, this digital world is changing the way all of us process information.

The Pew Internet & American Life Project research study released in December 2007 revealed that 59% of all teens could be considered Internet content creators—they’ve created at least one blog, wiki, or Web page, or posted original artwork, photography, stories, or video online. The survey found that content creation is not just about posting things; rather, it’s about participating in conversations about the content.

E-mail is so passé. Today’s students text message, instant message, blog, and go on social networking sites. Only 14% of all teens report sending e-mails to their friends, making it the least popular form of daily social communications on the Pew list.

Think some of your students aren’t online? Think again. A full 93% of teenagers are Internet users, compared to 73% in 2000. And what about blogging? Almost 40% of 12- to 14-year-olds read blogs, and the number increases to 58% within the 15- to 17-year-old group, according to Pew research.

Do any of your students walk around with iPods? That’s a silly question, I know, because Apple has sold more than 150 million iPods
worldwide since they were introduced in 2001, making it the best-selling digital audio player in history.

Consider the impact of the short video Shift Happens, by Karl Fisch, director of technology for Arapahoe High School in Centennial, Colorado. Originally produced for a simple staff development day in August 2006, the video has made its way to many national and even international conferences and has been viewed by more than 20 million people. How? YouTube, of course. You can (and should) view the updated version, now called Did You Know 2.0 on YouTube (www.YouTube.com).

What’s Out There?

Today, the shift has moved from learning how to use the Internet and a computer to infusing technology into classroom instruction. Middle school students still need to learn operating fundamentals, but most kids already have some proficiency, and so do teachers. So, the biggest challenge is finding ways to incorporate technology into the classroom to make learning fun, engaging, relevant, and current. Here are some ideas.

A wiki—a Web page or collection of Web pages that allows anyone who goes on it to contribute or edit its content (think Wikipedia.org)—is a terrific source for group collaboration, and there are a number of free wiki sites for educators to get you going. These include www.pbwiki.com, www.wetpaint.com, and www.wikispaces.com.

What about blogs? A blog is a Web site (or it can be hosted on a Web site like MySpace), usually created by an individual or company, with regular commentary, descriptions of events, or other content like photos, videos, music, or artwork. Many blogs provide commentary or news on a particular subject (such as what you might find on a news Web site) while others function more as personal online diaries (think MySpace).

What do the social networking sites have to do with education? Well, nothing and everything. When we were growing up, before the digital age, we might get together with friends and hang out or go cruising. Today, much of that happens online, through social networking sites like MySpace. And the numbers are staggering.

What are social networking sites important? Because they help facilitate online content creation (77% of social network users have created content) and blogging, foster collaboration, and teach users 21st century technology skills.

What about podcasts—audio or video files distributed over the Internet for use on portable media players and the computer? A student can download lessons, museum tours, how-to videos, and other educational content. It can be a tool for teachers to communicate curriculum, assignments, and other information. Teachers can record book discussions, vocabulary, or foreign language lessons, international pen pal letters, music performances, interviews, and debates for student access any time.

Infusing the Technology

Dzana Homan, CEO of Futurekids, which provides professional development services to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania’s Classrooms for the Future initiative, says, “Our whole focus in Pennsylvania is different. We’ve moved far beyond just teaching schools how to use the equipment, into a much deeper mode of integrating technology into lesson plans, student presentations, and digital creation. Our trainers and the teachers we [work with] are integrating wikis, student digital workspaces, Web casts, and much more. Of course, it’s all aligned to state standards, but the purpose of the initiative is to equip students with true 21st century learning skills.”

Patricia Saracyewski, technology coordinator of K–8 Mater Dei School in Topeka, Kansas, recently introduced the Real Journeys in Technology curriculum to her school. The curriculum is built around a scope and sequence of 500 learning objectives in 10 key technology areas including operating environments, databases, word processing, spreadsheets, graphics, Internet, multimedia, programming, desktop publishing, and applied technology.

“My favorite story is when a student completed a project, and said ‘This is magic’ and I replied, ‘No, it’s not magic, it’s programming,’” Saracyewski says.

Consider the challenge for St. Vincent Catholic School, a K–8 school located in an impoverished area minutes away from downtown Los Angeles. “We’re located in the heart of Los Angeles and serve many families that might not otherwise have access to technology. We start our students with technology learning in the second grade,” Sister Cabrini, principal of St. Vincent School, says.

Sister Cabrini explains that their program does not treat the computer as a toy, but rather as a tool to help students learn to create spreadsheets, research science projects, and do classroom presentations.

“To me, the computer is a tool, just like a pencil. In our environment, with many bilingual students who are on the lower end of the socio-economic ladder, it acts as the great equalizer,” she says. “We know that our students have the edge as they continue their education. They’re not going to be left out.”

Once you start the process of infusing technology into your classroom, you will find an abundance of information right at your fingertips. You will also discover a national and global community of teachers who are using technology. You will discover amazing teacher resources, online lesson plan depositories, online teacher groups, user groups, and other teachers and administrators just like you who understand that the future of teaching will need to have a technological focus if we are going to prepare our students with the necessary 21st century learning skills required in the new global economy.

John Peretz is a Colorado-based writer who covers a wide range of K–12 technology integration issues in education. E-mail JOHNPERETZ@aol.com

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Mixing Music and Meaning

By Jaime Marcus

There's no doubt about it: the iPod has become an appendage for many middle school students. Students are masters at concealing it in the classroom; they cannot possibly enter the lunchroom without one; and they are perpetually looking to expand their playlists and upgrade their devices.

As teachers, we can fight the ubiquity of the iPod or we can embrace it. I choose the latter. But embracing doesn't mean allowing it indiscriminately in the classroom, or a study hall, or even the hallways. Embracing the iPod means using it as a tool for learning.

As an English teacher and music aficionado, I've always tried to incorporate music into my classroom. Years ago, I designed an activity, Connecting Lyrics and Quotes (to literature) (CLAQ), in which students analyzed a song or quote and connected it to a piece of literature. For the most part, it was a big hit for my seventh and eighth graders. They began seeing the deeper meaning in the songs they listened to and they were able to see beyond the text they were reading. They started to "get" common themes between a story and a song.

Students who chose quotes for this activity had similar epiphanies and, more advantageous to them, those quote-choosing students were well prepared for the critical lens essay in their eleventh grade New York State English Regents Exam for which they have to analyze a quote and apply it to two texts they've read.

To adhere to the New York State Learning Standards—specifically, Language for Social Interaction—I required students to present their CLAQs orally. The idea was to have an intimate conversation—sans notes—with their classmates about the song's or quote's deeper meaning and its connection to the text. Some students even chose to bring in the music and play it on my über-cool 1990s sound system.

My classroom became steeped in CLAQ culture: presenters were tagged CLAQers and the audience CLAQees. Presentations were special—they only occurred on the last Friday of each month. To this day, many former students tell me that CLAQ was one of their most memorable activities. And of course a few former students have told me they dreaded CLAQ because of their public speaking phobias. But I'm sure even they would agree that CLAQ was not as intimidating as other oral presentations.

Changing with the Times

Two years ago, CLAQ, like the sale of compact discs, began to fizzle. I'm not sure...
from CLAQ. Students still have to write

my favorite activity in my 10-year tenure.

I began to roar the hallways. And

I had amassed over 500 CDs in my time, an impressive feat for

I began to roam the hallways. And

As I was telling this student that I’d just bought Guster’s new CD, another student in earshot interrupted us: “Mr. Marcus, people still buy CDs?” I truly didn’t know how to react. I had amassed over 500 CDs in my time, an impressive feat for

As I was telling this student that I’d just bought Guster’s new CD, another student in earshot interrupted us: “Mr. Marcus, people still buy CDs?” I truly didn’t know how to react. I had amassed over 500 CDs in my time, an impressive feat for

My second thought was much, much scarier: Oh my! I’m getting old! I had to

The student writing aspect of What’s in Your iPod? does not stray too much from CLAQ. Students still have to write

a deep analysis of a song and connect it or another song to a text read in eighth grade. Because students are choosing their songs—searching deep into the bowels of their iPods—their writing tends to be much more interesting to read than other analytical writing. (I will use the term iPod here, but any MP3 player will do.)

With CLAQ, the focus was on only one song or quote. With What’s in Your iPod?, students choose three songs. They use one song for the deep analysis and connect the second song to literature. The third song is a wildcard: it can be used like the first or second song, or they can connect it with a real-life person whom the student knows well.

I do have guidelines regarding appropriate and inappropriate songs. If a song has sexual or extremely violent content, it is off limits. I am able to tolerate one curse word, as long as that word is changed on the lyrics they hand in. I warn students that I will not grade an analysis of an inappropriate song—thus dropping them to a failing grade.

Now, where this assignment really

Weaving Music and Literature

What’s in Your iPod?’s first go ‘round was two years ago. My students loved it, and last year’s students wouldn’t shut up about it. They began asking in September—annoyingly at times—“When’s that iPod assignment?”

As much as those questions are taken as a compliment to one of the best activities I’ve created, the most satisfaction I’ve received from this assignment has been the empathy and newfound understanding my students displayed last year. Kids who barely spoke to each other—although they’d been together for nine years in the same classes—began striking up conversations about music. Students who were practically best friends began to see

Students travel around the room, listening to their classmates’ three songs, reading each other’s writing, and then assessing each other’s work. After five minutes, each rotates to another desk, and the process continues for two 45-minute class periods. (They carry their own headphones with them as they travel the room. I’m not a big fan of germs, nor are my students.)

Not every student has an iPod, so I—and a few students—volunteer to burn the three songs for these students onto a CD. We have portable CD players in the classroom so students can use those. Some students borrow iPods from students in other classes and some students just present their work without the music. In those cases, their classmates comment on their writing without listening to the music.

In the end, I collect the students’ writing and their classmates’ analyses for assessment.

The Set Up

The student writing aspect of What’s in Your iPod? does not stray too much from CLAQ. Students still have to write

Themes, Messages, and the Songwriter’s

Jam), being mindful of poetic devices, “Waste” by Phish or “Black” by Pearl

In the end, I collect the students’ writing and their classmates’ analyses for assessment.
purpose. Students then annotate The Dave Matthews Band’s “Ants Marching,” which is rife with metaphors and deeper meanings. I then model how to convert annotations into analytical paragraphs.

Toward the end of the week, I model how to connect a song to a piece of literature. I usually choose Jack Johnson’s “Gone” and compare it to Guy de Maupassant’s “The Necklace”—again, first by annotating it, then converting notes to paragraphs.

We also spend almost an entire class period brainstorming songs with deeper meaning and their connections to the literature we’ve read. I spend at least one class period and a few lunch periods meeting with students before the assignment is due. We also review six techniques for weaving in quotations.

Undeniably, the heaps of hard work are more than worth it. The writing is markedly better than most of their writing, which is no surprise. Knowing that my curriculum is centered on analytical writing, I have to create assignments like this; otherwise, my students will dread writing.

Both CLAQ and What’s in Your iPod? can also be used in social studies or as part of a cross-curricular unit. There are myriad songs about war, the Civil Rights movement, and history in general.

In less affluent areas, where every student does not have an iPod, CLAQ is more accessible. I began the assignment in Yonkers, New York, Westchester County’s largest city in population, not wealth. The academic value of both assignments is quite remarkable, but the intimacy and camaraderie What’s in Your iPod? creates are priceless and well worth any teacher’s time.

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For a look at what’s on the iPods in Jaime’s class, visit www.nmsa.org/MiddleGround/August2008

How to Annotate Songs
1. Keep asking yourself why. Why did this person write this? What was going on in his/her life when he/she wrote this? Is this person trying to say something bigger? Like a human truth?
2. Be assertive—your close reading is YOUR opinion stated like a fact. Don’t write “I think” or “In my opinion.”
3. Analyze sections of which you can make sense.
4. See if there are any literary or poetic devices (simile, metaphor, symbolism, personification, irony). If so, discuss what they mean in the song. Don’t just write, “There’s a metaphor in this song.” Discuss why the metaphor is important; what does it mean?
5. Pick a song from a songwriter that you like and you know much about. And if you don’t know much about the lyricist, do some research!
6. Read twice or thrice.
My humanities students pressed in around my laptop, so caught up in the moment that they completely ignored the image projected in front of the classroom. The ringtone beeped intermittently. “Are they there? Are they there?” Suddenly, a face flashed on the screen and Steve Bergen’s words “Hello? Hello? Are you there, Stoneleigh-Burnham girls from Massachusetts?” boomed forth from the speakers. Amidst the ensuing laughter, several students called out “We’re here! Hi!” and before long, students on both sides of the connection were introducing themselves. Thus began a collaboration between two schools that continues to enrich the lives of the students. Captured in that moment was much of what has made this partnership successful: the unseen planning by the teachers, the level of nervous excitement and engagement on the part of the students, and through it all, the goal to put students first.

Immediately prior to the videoconference, Steve and I had each taken our students on a quick tour of our partner school’s Web site. In some ways, the schools are very different. The Children’s Storefront (TCS) is a coed, tuition-free day school in East Harlem, while Stoneleigh-Burnham School (SBS) is an all-girls day and boarding school in Greenfield, a small city in rural Western Massachusetts. All students at TCS are African-American, whereas the seventh graders at SBS are of various racial backgrounds. Yet, it doesn’t take long for middle school students to establish a common ground. My students had brainstormed some basic questions they wanted to ask the other students, including favorite singers. When one of the TCS girls said she liked Chris Brown, my students burst into laughter as one girl opened her mouth in mock shock and outrage: “But Nora says he’s hers!” I knew we had definitely connected.

### Students Coming Together

Our collaboration originated in a unit my students created around the theme “Are girls smarter than boys?” They asked me to find partner classrooms whose students would be interested in studying with us.

Previous experience told me I would get the best response if I sent requests for participation to various listserves. In past years, this had helped me find schools around the world to participate in bulletin board discussions on different works of literature. I posted on three listserves: NMSA’s MiddleTalk; LiteracyWorkshop.org, for middle school teachers interested in literacy instruction; and ISED-L, for independent school teachers of all levels.

Steve was one of several teachers who responded, and from the beginning he made it clear he wanted a closer and longer-term relationship than would be possible just by studying the above unit. I agreed, and we began discussing how best to bring our classrooms together.

The technology we used to set up the exchange was simple enough. Steve and I each had school-issued laptops—his was an Apple with built-in Web cam, mine was a tablet model. My computer needed a Web cam in order to participate in a videoconference, and fortunately, our technology coordinator readily agreed to buy an inexpensive model for about $25.

Although iChat and AIM software would also have served, in the end we decided to use Skype (www.skype.com). This freeware enables you to make unlimited free calls from computer to computer, either audio-only or including a live video feed. Skype works smoothly and easily on different platforms, and generally provides high voice quality.

Though there were a few bugs in the technology, they were not enough to place the exchange at risk. Skype itself worked like a charm. For the first few conferences, we had difficulty with dropped
calls on start-up, but eventually I solved the problem by plugging my computer directly into our network rather than going wireless.

We learned to keep in cell phone contact until the computer connection was established. However, even with the network cable, the Apple machines used at TCS were much more stable than my computer, which often dropped the video feed from TCS, leaving us with only audio—although they could almost always see us. Speaking half-jokingly, half in frustration, Steve once told us that he was going to put one of TCS’s laptops in a cab and send it up to Greenfield. Fortunately, the students were keenly aware that other people could at least hear them, and this helped generate enough excitement to keep the project working effectively.

Each of Steve’s seventh grade computer classes meets only once a week, and we were fortunate that both met when I was teaching seventh graders in either humanities or ESL. For special occasions, our Exploring Language teacher was willing to trade class times with me so that the entire Humanities class could Skype with both of Steve’s classes. Had this not been possible, we could have sent video files to each other or used free and publicly available Web sites such as www.ning.com.

Give and Take

We began the exchange with a series of introductory activities. I asked my students what they wanted to know about these unknown students who would be participating in their unit, and they came up with seven basic questions: age, gender, favorite color, favorite food, favorite thing to do, interests, and hobbies. In addition to sharing answers to these questions by e-mail and Web pages as well as videoconferencing, the students created metaphors describing themselves and their schools as a creative way to learn more about each other. TCS students also shared their opinions about whether girls are smarter than boys. (In case you’re wondering, the predominant opinion was that neither gender is smarter, but girls often work harder.)

As Steve and I prepared to move on to the next stage, we discussed the needs of our students in each course. Since he was teaching computers and I was teaching humanities, the natural intersection of our course goals was learning to use technology as a communication tool. We agreed that his students would teach mine how to make Web pages, and that we all would participate in the annual LiteracyWorkshop.org Online Poetry Slam in which students use blogs to post and comment on their original poetry.

The sessions during which TCS students taught my students how to make Web pages were among the most enjoyable of the exchange. Steve asked his students to think through what my students would need to know and would enjoy doing, and how best to order their presentations. On the appointed day, my students crammed into our computer room, two to a machine. We assigned a student to interact face to face with TCS students and pass on instructions to her classmates. I wrote HTML commands on a whiteboard and squeezed myself between chairs to check that each student was writing her code properly.

After 30 minutes, my students had designed simple but attractive pages, and within 24 hours they were posted on the Internet and linked from the TCS Web site. They may be viewed at http://www.cstorefront.org/html/index4608.html.

After my students taught Steve’s students to write cinquains, we were ready for the Online Poetry Slam, whose homepage can be found at http://www.literacyworkshop.org/poetryslam/poetryslam.htm.

Forging a Bond

Clearly, the students were thinking deeply about each other’s writing and how it brought them together. Equally clearly, their poetry dealt with complex and personal emotions. The trust they developed while getting to know each other and learning computer and writing skills may have helped add depth to this final stage of the students’ collaboration.

Our students hope to meet in person at some point. Perhaps my students will go to Harlem and present their original play, or we will meet in Connecticut for a field trip and picnic. Even if this doesn’t happen, the students have a sense of connection that will live in their memories their whole lives. As one student from The Children’s Storefront said, “Your school sounds like fun and I know that you guys have a lot in common with us.”

The students’ poetry was as individual as the students themselves, and so were the comments. One TCS student reacted to a poem entitled “Teddy Bear”: “MY teddie bear was call don’t tell anyone but it was call Mr snuggles.” Similar honesty and trust is revealed in the reactions to another poem entitled “Photograph.” The poem reads:

That photograph of you and me
It means so much to me
Because I realized after all this time
I love you
Like a baby needs its family
I need you in my life.

One comment was, “I really enjoyed your poem. It relates to my friend and I. For the first time in a while I smiled. All because of your poem. Its deep, loving, and affectionate. Thanks so much for such a wonderful poem. Its really nice!!!”

Bill Ivey is the middle school dean at Stoneleigh-Burnham School in Greenfield, Massachusetts. He teaches Humanities 7, ESL 7, and Rock Band. E-mail bill01370@yahoo.com
Teachers have used games as instructional tools in the classroom for years. It’s high time they recognized the instructional power of today’s video games as well. According to a 2007 survey conducted by the national education nonprofit Project Tomorrow, 51% of the students surveyed said that electronic gaming made difficult concepts easier to understand.

Researchers echo that sentiment, arguing that while regular instruction tends to present information as abstract ideas, gaming places the subject matter within a meaningful context. Richard Van Eck wrote of instructional gaming, “What you must learn is directly related to the environment in which you learn and demonstrate it; thus, the learning is not only relevant but applied and practiced within that context.”

One school that uses educational video games as instructional tools is Ocoee Middle School, a State Demonstration School in Orange County, Florida. Ocoee Middle School showcases groundbreaking high-tech advances in learning as well as curriculum and teaching strategies that emphasize 21st century skills. Among the goals of the curriculum program is to connect students with the world and each other through technology; encourage students to work in groups as well as take individual initiative; and have children experience the excitement and “aha” factor of hands-on discovery using the latest technologies.

At Ocoee Middle School, instruction transforms the learning environment and keeps that spark of excitement palpable—especially in classrooms where more difficult subjects are being taught.

Lessons Learned
Since pre-algebra and algebra are common stumbling blocks for students, in late 2006, Ocoee Middle School chose to be one of a handful of schools to implement math-based video games to support its math curriculum, specifically in pre-algebra and algebra. Students learn math concepts by completing first-person action adventure missions that incorporate three-dimensional graphics, sound, animation, and story lines comparable to those in popular video games.

The games used at Ocoee Middle School, DimensionM and Evolver, cover an extensive list of objectives aligned to the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics standards, but it’s a good idea to check with each developer to know exactly what their games cover.

The plan was for educators to become familiar with the new technology and have fun with the games. Math teachers received one day of inservice training so they would have an overall understanding of the game. Any school that is planning to implement electronic games for instructional delivery
It is also a good idea for teachers to run a sample mission (or have a student run one) the first few times they use the game in the classroom so students are properly oriented to the games’ environments.

Teachers do not have to be gamers themselves to use video games effectively. Traci Dunbar, an eighth grade math teacher, came up with a resourceful way to master the games. She told her first period class on the first day that they played the game, “I have never played this game. Log on and tell me how to play it so I can teach my second period.” She continued to do that all day with each of her classes. By the end of the day, she knew the game and all the tricks so well that the students thought she was a genius.

Because the math concepts were embedded into adventure missions, students were motivated to keep trying to overcome obstacles or failures in order to complete their missions.

“To the kids, it’s not math. It’s a video game that has some math problems,” says seventh grade math teacher Tony San Filippo. Students would stand in line, waiting for a turn to play a game when their classroom work was completed. Jeff Gallup, the school’s instructional technology specialist, observes that the game is very engaging and kids want to play it. “You don’t get that from a workbook,” he says.

Another advantage of video games is that they can foster teamwork—an essential skill for the 21st century workplace. One of the papers presented at the 2005 Summit of Educational Games in Washington, D.C., entitled “Harnessing the Power of Video Games for Learning,” stated, “Games and simulations hold promise for training team members to work effectively as a team, especially in decisionmaking, exercising judgment, and solving problems under pressure. … These basic features of team training may have widespread applicability.”

Ocoee Middle School has been able to explore this aspect of electronic gaming for the past year. For example, as the students were working on linear equations, the teachers introduced multiplayer games that allowed students to compete against peers in their classroom, building, district, and even across the country.

**Encouraging Learning Initiative**

In 2007, the educators further integrated the video games into the math curriculum. They increased the number of single-player mission games and added several multiplayer games.

The multiplayer games give students the choice of beginner, intermediate, and advanced math play. Players can also choose which skills they want to work on or they can mix things up. For example, a game called Swarm allows for a random mix setting. The concepts of prime numbers, square roots, order of operation, and the greatest common factor are just some of the key concepts that could be covered in that one game.

The school has about 800 computers for student use, 32 of which are readily accessible in the classroom areas with another 20 available in the media center for game play before school starts. Therefore, students in a single class can use the games all at once without having to wait for a turn. They can also work on the games individually outside of class time.

Ocoee Middle School math teachers primarily use the games as reinforcement for subjects that have been already taught or for topics that the students are working on. However, since access to the games is not restricted, as students finish a level and move on through the game on their own, they often encounter math concepts teachers have not previously covered. At those times, the students tend to go to friends and peers to ask about those concepts so that they can continue to play.

As a result, teachers have had students master untaught math concepts because the students wanted to continue to advance in the games.

In addition, although pre-algebra and algebra are subjects taught in seventh and eighth grades respectively, the school has made the games available for all students, and students in the lower grades have shown unexpected initiative. “When I saw sixth graders asking eighth graders how to do the math so they can play the game, I saw the power that this type of gaming could have,” says Keith Carney, the sixth grade math teacher. That unanticipated peer collaboration has been a welcome side benefit.

**Tallying the Results**

The school has not yet received its latest test scores, so administrators cannot calculate the impact the games have had on high-stakes test performance. However, teachers have reported definite gains in students’ knowledge of divisibility, perfect squares, prime and composite numbers, and so on. Students also have displayed faster mental processing because winning many of the games depends on speed.

In any case, the games are about more than scores, they are about motivation. Educational gaming has had the desired effect: getting students to spend more time exploring complex math concepts before, during, and after class time. Students forget that they are learning about complicated topics such as coordinating systems and scatter plots, order of operations or proportions, but they are able to carry what they mastered in the game over to their work in the classroom.

In addition, because of the task-oriented nature of the games, players have become incredible problem solvers. In all, the games’ capacity to cultivate social interaction, team problem-solving, and the motivation to improve math skills are of tremendous benefit to the students.

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At a recent presentation to 450 sixth graders in South Central Pennsylvania, I asked the audience “How many of you are 14 years old?” Not a hand went up. I then asked, “How many of you have a MySpace page?” More than 300 hands were energetically and rather proudly raised! They beat the system!

Students must be at least 14 years old to have a MySpace page and they all had one! They thought they were so shrewd, developing their MySpace page by lying here and there to cover their true identity. How naïve! What they failed to realize was that now they were all in danger.

A few years back we began hearing about children falling prey to unscrupulous people in online chat rooms. Students were giving away information about themselves, where they lived, what school they attended, what kind of music they liked: all the information stalkers needed to lure their target into trusting them enough to meet them someplace.

Today’s social networking sites have compounded those dangers. Although parents and teachers are more attentive to these dangers and are taking an active role in monitoring the online habits of their children and students, the problem continues because of the naïveté of young adolescents who are smart enough to lie but not shrewd enough to be consistent about it.

Students lie about their hometown and their age on the opening MySpace page, but when it comes to the About Me or profile section, they tell the truth, consistently giving away school names, grade levels, friends’ names, and instant message screen names—all of which give a predator clues about the student’s identity and location.

A 2006 study by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reported that about 13% of Internet users ages 10–17 received unwanted sexual solicitations. Teens were by far the biggest target, accounting for 90% of the solicitations. And about 4% said they were asked for nude photos of themselves.

Let’s be pragmatic: You are never going to prevent your students from going into the social network arena; it is far too trendy. You have a better chance of convincing them to change their style of dress! But you do need to help them understand the dangers of these seemingly harmless sites.

Here are what I consider to be some basic online behavior areas to which middle level students need to attend so they can at least increase their safety when using social networking sites.

**Location and Age**

When registering in MySpace, many students lie about their age and location only to tell the truth about themselves in the About Me section of their site. Their mistake at this point is twofold. First and most significant is that early on in the registration process, MySpace asks the student for a name and e-mail address for their records (which MySpace does not publish). On the same form, they ask for the student’s Zip code. Most young adolescents who lie about their location on their public page don’t realize that the correct Zip code they listed becomes an element of the search engine on MySpace. For example, a young adolescent may register with the correct New York Zip code, but think she is fooling someone by indicating on her MySpace page that she lives in California. Even though the Zip code is not displayed on the student’s public page, the predator can go to the Browse area of MySpace and search for members who live within X number of miles of a specific Zip code.

A second mistake is that they lie about their age and then post a picture of themselves, which others can see does not match the age they listed. Also related to this inconsistency, in the profile area of MySpace, students list their school and attendance years. If they say they are 25 years old and list that they are attending Heritage Middle School from 2007 to 2010, the discrepancy becomes laughable.

**URL Listing**

Another area where students make mistakes is in the listing of their own URL. This element of MySpace is advertised with the "hook" that students can have their own Internet address: www.myspace.com/XXXXXXX where the XXXXXXs are of the student’s own making. The example that is given is www.myspace.com/TOM.
So what do most young adolescents do? They use their last name in the URL or they use some other identifier such as a sport they play, team number, or their grade level—all of which give away information to a predator about the “target.” It is most troubling when a student uses an instant message screen name, which leads to the third problem area.

AIM

Students must recognize that by placing their AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) screen name in their URL, or even more obvious, posting it in the About Me section of MySpace with the phrase “IM me at xxxxxxxxx” they are allowing access to their AIM away messages. If their AIM properties are not set to “private,” anyone can use AIM to look up the Buddy Information and view, in real time, away messages posted by the student, along with other information the student may have posted for their friends to see. In these away messages and postings, students often share where they are, what they are doing, and include their cell or home phone numbers for friends to call them. It’s all a predator needs.

Internet Travelers Beware

After spending 35 years teaching middle level students, I now travel across the United States lecturing about these Internet safety issues. Each time I speak, the students, teachers, and parents are stunned to realize the vulnerability their kids have when they “talk” to strangers or post information on the Internet.

For some reason technology has a habit of pushing away the older population while enticing the younger generation. If you accept the premise that the Internet functions as an evolving picture of our civilization, years from now what will society say about our current use of the Internet?

I hope this will be viewed as a time when we came to realize the inherent dangers faced by those who travel this information highway and a time when we taught students to be aware of these dangers and to protect themselves.

Chuck Favata, a former middle school educator in Council Rock School District, Pennsylvania, is a workshop presenter who focuses on Internet safety. E-mail chuck@chuckfavata.com

A Journey Toward Professionalism

By Philip Brown

By definition, teaching is a profession. Teachers spend years developing the capacity and the content knowledge to be able to teach others. State organizations such as the Professional Standards Commission in Georgia help promote professionalism in the teaching field in the same way that the American Board of Family Medicine monitors the behavior of family physicians in the medical field. They determine the code of ethics for educators, the certification requirements, and the consequences for violations.

We are in the learning business, and the business includes our ability to learn, adapt, change, and grow. That is our obligation as professionals. After all, we expect our students to learn new information daily. So, are teachers who work in isolation, who don’t learn something on a daily basis, who don’t adapt to change, and who fail to grow, really professionals?

True professionals are willing to share ideas, successes, and failures with others to help the overall body of knowledge grow.

• Is the doctor who finds the cure for cancer but fails to share his results with others a professional?
• Is the lawyer who finds the loophole to free a man whom he knows is a murderer a professional?

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There are very few "absolutes" in education. In fact, there are very few aspects of education about which we can say, "Yes, this can be backed up by solid, unequivocal research."

However, a few aspects of vocabulary development have stood the test of time and undergone sufficient rigor in research so that we can give an affirmative nod to their instructional implications.

Drawing from reviews of the research on vocabulary development we have published through the years, we present the following list of "musts" or "absolutes" for use in middle grades classrooms as well as the classrooms of our elementary and secondary counterparts.

Just as we suggest that these absolutes span across the grade levels, we also maintain the position that they are critical for effective vocabulary instruction in the different content areas at all grade levels, not just in reading and language arts classrooms.

1. Provide opportunities to engage in independent reading (the implicit approach).

Students who read more tend to have larger and more sophisticated vocabularies than those who read very little. Therefore, learners of all ability levels need opportunities at home and in school to read materials appropriate to their level as a way to develop their vocabulary.

Independent reading also means that students have a vested interest in reading when they are allowed to self-select books to read. We also have learned from working with struggling older readers that simply allowing students to select their own books may not be enough effort on our part to make this approach work. Some students select books to read but invariably do not finish them. They lack stamina, need to be nudged to try something different, and don't have the experience of actually enjoying a good book.

Independent reading means not only that students should spend a lot of time reading, but also that they should read widely. Wide reading refers to active reading engagement in a variety of genres, about different topics, and in different text formats such as electronic texts. In this way, students are exposed to a multitude of different words used for conceptual understanding across myriad topics.

With the many types of literacy today, more and more educators are advocating that our classrooms be stocked with multiple sources of information. Graphic novels, for example, are popular with young adolescents and they provide an engaging and viable alternative to traditional text. Newspapers and news magazines are now available specifically for young adolescents and are another means of motivating the reluctant reader. Even full-length novels can be found online. Such resources are helpful in supporting wide reading, which, in turn, provides rich opportunities for incidental word learning.

2. Teach significant vocabulary directly when necessary (the explicit approach).

Often teachers need to use a direct approach wherein the word is displayed in context, illustrating its relationship among other words in the passage. Some form of a graphic organizer or semantic web is an effective way to show the key terms and explain how the terms are related and what they mean in the context of the selection to be read.

The teacher can use the graphic before reading to pre-teach the vocabulary and students can use it during the reading as they add more information from the text and other sources to enrich the meaning of the key words. Then, after the reading, the teacher and students return to the graphic to contribute as a class to the terms displayed.

Another way to organize and present new vocabulary is to focus students' attention on the targeted word by asking relevant forms of the following questions: "What is it (the main category)?" "What is its purpose?" "What are the functions?" "What is it like?" "What are some examples?" The students' responses can be organized graphically to represent the students' depth of knowledge of the new terms.

3. Understand the nature of the words.

We must be mindful of the words we select to teach, recognizing that different words require different types of instruction, different words will be known at different levels, and different words play different roles in their impact on comprehension. Research tells us that students can comprehend what they are reading even if they do not know up to 15% of the words in a passage.

Some words are new labels for familiar concepts. For example, arrogant is a term for their familiar phrase stuck up. Some words are new labels for unfamiliar and more complex concepts—words such as economic or arbitrary. Obviously these words require different types of instruction to help students understand their meanings.

Students also know different words on different levels. Sometimes we need to have a rich, decontextualized knowledge of a particular word to comprehend its meaning. In other instances, just knowing that a specific word has something to do with a given topic may be all we need. Various levels of knowing a word is an important consideration for word selection. It stands to reason, then, that to provide...
students with effective vocabulary instructional activities, we need to carefully analyze the words we select to teach. The following questions can serve as useful guides: How important is this word to understanding the passage? At what level must a reader know the word in order to comprehend? What do students already know about the word? Are there familiar parts, such as prefixes and roots? What type of word is it—a new label for a familiar concept or a label for a new and difficult concept?

4. Teach key vocabulary in context.

Another instructional model begins by directing students’ attention to the page and paragraph where a target word is located and asking them to follow along as you read the selection. Then, focus the students’ attention on the key word and how it is used in the sentence. Next, ask students to guess what the word means from the surrounding context and have them identify the familiar word parts.

In the target word subsistence, for example, students identify the prefix sub— and the suffix -ence. Then they share words with similar affixes and roots such as subterranean, submarine, existence, and persistence.

From here, you can help the students verbalize what those word parts mean and then deduce the meaning of the target word subsistence as “the state of living below the standard level.”

Then, by showing how the word is used in the context of the actual selection, teachers help students learn how to figure out the meanings of unknown vocabulary. Merely providing a dictionary definition is not sufficient to ensure that students can assimilate the words into their existing vocabularies.

5. Ensure that students encounter the key terms frequently.

We know from research that students need at least 12 or more meaningful encounters with new words to internalize the meanings. This is key for all ability levels of students and for students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

It is not enough to pre-teach key terms. The teacher must draw attention to the terms during reading by asking students to keep a vocabulary journal of the key terms, noting page numbers, sentences, or explicit or implicit in-text definitions. After the reading, the teacher can reinforce the key terms by asking the students, “Who can tell me what page and sentence the word permafrost is used? Read the sentence aloud. Now what do you think it means?”

Additional follow up can include using the word in a different sentence, working in small groups to come up with a paragraph using some of the key terms, or engaging in a dialogue in pairs using as many of the key terms as possible.

6. Teach independent word learning strategies.

To become independent word learners, students need to acquire lifelong word-learning strategies. These strategies include developing word awareness, using available context clues, analyzing word structures, connecting to background knowledge, and using external resources such as references and other people.

Teachers do spend time teaching context clues, morphemic analysis, and dictionary and thesaurus use to help students develop these word-learning strategies. Nonetheless, word awareness is a critical aspect of becoming an independent word learner.

Textbooks or teachers often tell students which words they need to learn. Yet every teacher of middle level students knows that young adolescents are looking for independence in every aspect of their lives. That is why we must give them the opportunity to select the words they want to learn more about in addition to the terms that are essential to understanding a particular subject.

Let students identify two or three words they want to know more about related to the topic under study. They can find these words from any source: an online article, a magazine, a television station, a blog, a movie. Then they keep a journal of the new word, recording where they found it, how it was used, what they think it means, what it really means, and a sentence they developed using the word. Finally they share their words in small group session with fellow students voting on the favorite newly discovered words to learn and share with the rest of the class.

Developing word awareness in this manner promotes independent learning of new vocabulary and gives young adolescents the voice in the learning that they all are seeking.

7. Use rich, robust instruction and make learning fun.

We all know how much adolescents enjoy talking and socializing, so we should design vocabulary activities that give them those opportunities. Encourage them to review key terms by using the words in a conversation. Let them work together and use key terms in the composition of a play, a travelogue, an e-mail message, or even a version of Vocabulary Tube where groups of students are videotaped in skits using and acting out the key words.

Eliminate all those old methods that ask students to look up words in a dictionary or memorize a list of definitions. Throw out those outdated workbooks that are of little interest to today’s youth.

Rich and robust instruction means going beyond definitional approaches and getting students to become actively involved in thinking about words, relating them to real life experiences, and developing associations and relationships among them. Rich and robust instruction means making word learning fun, and that is the “absolute” truth.

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Essential Questions: Mining for Understanding

By Folwell Dunbar

I love trivia. I always have. Even before the popular board game was invented, I was hooked. A fun-fact fanatic, I consumed trifles like a ravenous shrew. While geography and animals were by far my favorite topics, it really didn’t matter. As long as it was trivial, as worthless as a pile of Pompeian pumice, I was intrigued!

Of course, when I became a teacher, I just had to share the wealth. So I peppered my lessons, projects, and tests with all kinds of fascinating (at least to me) factoids. How many horses were shot from beneath Confederate General Bedford Forrest? 29. What bird lays the largest egg in proportion to its own body size? The kiwi. What is the deepest and oldest lake in the world? Lake Baikal. (Just for the record, it also holds more water than all of the Great Lakes combined!)

Obscure records, bizarre events, outlandish quotes, and odd coincidences cropped up everywhere. From crossword puzzles and extra credit to essay topics and debate prompts, they ruled (and most certainly ruined) my curriculum.

Unfortunately, as we inevitably discover, universities don't offer degrees in Trivia and Jeopardy Contestant is not a legitimate career option. Rarely in an interview are you told, “If you can name the most densely populated country in the world, the job is yours.” (Monaco is the answer by the way, though some would dispute its nation status.) Fun (another questionable term) facts have little in common with core knowledge and, no matter how hard you look, can’t be found in most state standards.

While I was selling junk bond questions and spewing out pure drivel, my kids, intellectually deprived and bored to boot, were starved for something of real substance.

A Question-Marked Curriculum

So, how do we venture beyond trivial pursuits? With apologies to self-help books and the Dalai Lama, the answer is the question. Most questions posed to students in schools are of the forced-choice variety: the student is forced to choose a predetermined correct answer. What is the capital of El Salvador? Who wrote the Declaration of Independence? If a train left the station…what time would it arrive? While they are not always trivial, they do often elicit the response, “Who cares?” or “Does it really matter?” Not to mention, “I could have easily found this on Wikipedia.” (Insert your own expletive or punctuation mark for emphasis.)

As chef Emeril Lagasse would say, we need to “kick it up a notch!” and convert a percentage of our forced choice questions into essential ones: What can be done to bring political stability to countries like El Salvador in the developing world? What truths today are truly and universally self-evident? Planes, trains, or automobiles? What are the pros and cons for different modes of transportation?

Essential questions, also known as umbrella or driving questions, are truly and universally self-evident. Unfortunately, there is no U.N.-approved rubric for essential questions. It seems educators, parents, and pets have their own criteria. I’m certainly no exception. For convenience and trendiness, I’ve rounded mine down to an even 10:

1. Curriculum: Is it tied to key understandings and/or standards?
2. Student Interest: Does it relate to things kids actually care about?
3. Open-Ended: Does it require substantial “uncovering”?
4. Interdisciplinary: Does it demand multiple perspectives?
5. Age-Appropriate: Are the questions truly “kid-friendly”?
6. Challenging: Is it intellectually demanding, but not impossible?
7. Sequential: Are the questions asked in a logical order?
8. “Hands-On”: Can students demonstrate mastery in a novel way?
9. Assessment: Are there established criteria for student success?
10. Relevance: Does it have value beyond the classroom?

Note: It is not necessary or even possible to adhere to all of these. Nonetheless, they’re certainly worth shooting for.

SIPping for Answers

Scott Steckler, a long-time elementary school principal from the brutal trenches of New Orleans, is a veteran of many battles. From looping and multi-age to PBL (project-based learning) and CSR (comprehensive school reform), he has tried or seen it all. According to him, “The secret to success (he admits there are many, but claims everybody loves and demands a single silver bullet) is commitment. “You’ve gotta have everybody onboard for the lơnnnnnning haul! Ya have to give it time to take root.” When it comes to essential questions, this is definitely the case. It has to be an integral part of the school improvement plan and faculty buy-in is, well, essential.

So what does an essential question initiative look like in a school improvement plan (SIP)? The following are a few “real world” examples:

• On August 18, all teachers will attend a workshop on developing and using essential questions.

• The EQ whole-faculty study group will read and discuss Understanding by Design and will develop 3–5 action steps for the rest of the faculty.

• By the end of the 2008–2009 academic year, all teachers will have used four or more essential questions with their students.

• Grade level teams will develop and use five interdisciplinary questions per quarter. Teachers will post their essential questions on the outside of the classroom door and will include them in their curriculum maps.

• The school will share and celebrate essential questions in the monthly newsletter.

More important than the ever-expanding SIP (rarely the “living, breathing” document it aspires to be), is what teachers and students actually do with the questions in the classroom. As we all know, this is where the proverbial rubber meets the road—where sparks fly and learning happens!

Socrates, famous for his query-based sparring, once said, “Wisdom begins in wonder.” I’m pretty sure he would have been a big fan of essential questions.

I like to think of them as drill bits—we use them to mine understanding.

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A Classroom Without Rules?

By Paul Barnwell

It was more than halfway through the school year, and I had yet to send a student to the office for unruly classroom behavior or write up a discipline referral. Nor had I dealt with any major student disruptions. I was proud of this feat, especially because I teach at the middle school level, where young adolescents are prone to pass notes, display irrational outbursts of emotion, and test their boundaries.

My lack of discipline issues isn’t because I’m the perfect teacher—far from it—or because I rule with an unyielding prison guard mentality. Nor is it because I am lenient, displaying a penchant for ignoring wrongdoings. In fact, I don’t have classroom rules posted anywhere in the classroom, at least not in the traditional sense. Scan the four walls in Room 215 and you will find a plethora of student work, whimsical posters representing personal interests of my students and me, and bookshelves stacked full of independent reading material.

A rededication to practicing creative, positive classroom routines at the beginning of the year helped me establish an engaging, orderly learning climate. There’s no sense in launching into a demanding curriculum until the classroom is running smoothly. After all, those curriculum demands aren’t going to be met if you’re dealing with crowd control. It’s one thing to pay lip service to setting up classroom routines, it’s another thing to do, and do well. I’d like to offer up my own strategies.

My Simple Strategies

I spend ample time going over procedures and routines at the beginning of the year: how students enter the classroom, bell ringer activities, seat assignments, strategies for asking questions and solving problems on their own, stretch break, classroom clean up, turning in work, and student jobs.

With all the listed protocols, I explain the procedures, garner student support, and then we begin implementing the routines until I am satisfied that we are on the path toward a safe, orderly, and fun classroom climate.

During the past several years, students have given me feedback about what works and doesn’t work as far as classroom management is concerned.
This helps instill a sense of ownership on their part. I’ve also discovered that simple dialogue about protocols with students helps justify the procedures in their minds. That is to say, even though I might demand certain procedures they don’t necessarily enjoy—such as quiet, straight lines in the hallway when we travel as a class—students comply with little resistance after we talk about the reasons for these procedures.

Musical cues tell my students when it’s time to take a stretch break and clean up the room. During the opening weeks, I explain to my classes that when they hear a specific three-minute song, say “Sloop John B.” by the Beach Boys, they can get up, move around the room, and release some energy. If they aren’t in their assigned seats when the song ends, they lose break privileges for five school days. There is rarely a violation.

I also play a certain song when there are only a few minutes remaining in class. Students know it is time to clean up, turn in work, and return to stand at their assigned seats to wait for the bell. (I have a pet peeve about students crowding a doorway, skittishly tormenting each other as they wait for the bell to ring.)

As far as getting the attention of the class during group work or other social situations, I explain to the students that I don’t like raising my voice. To practice the attention signal, I tell them to get up and go talk to a friend. After they have been milling about, I say, “Clap once if you hear me.” I say even more quietly, “Clap twice if you hear me.” Students respond by clapping and then they listen, knowing it’s time for direction.

I follow a deliberate approach with all of these routines, then blend in community-building activities and curriculum as the weeks pass.

No rules posters dominate the walls in my classroom, but students don’t need them to know what’s expected of them. You, too, can devote that wall space to highlighting student work if you channel your opening of the year energy to demonstrating to your students what you want them to do rather than hounding them about what they shouldn’t be doing in your classroom.

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**Tips for Reaching Disruptive Students**

At last year’s NMSA Conference in Houston, Texas, staff developer Marty Applebaum shared several strategies for classroom management. They included:

1. Like your students. Look for positives.
2. Connect with students. Build relationships.
3. Be a better listener. Use words like, “I see,” “hmm,” and “really?”
4. Get students to listen. Use hand signals when you want them to be silent. Use music to get their attention. Change the tone of your voice.
5. Don’t let students have the power over you. Never defend yourself, never get hooked into an argument.
6. Reduce test anxiety by making the first question easy, increasing the font size, and going over directions with the students before they begin. Grade with a green pen, not a red pen.
7. Give students structure; they need to know what’s coming up.
8. Recognize that some students can’t sit still. Give those who tap their pencils a mouse pad to muffle the tapping. Give antsy students errands to run. Let students get up and change seats every once in awhile during class.
9. Don’t take disruptions personally.
10. Be patient.
Culture in the Modern Classroom

By Bruce Jones

I began teaching English as a Second Language 14 years ago when I landed my first job working for a private language school in Seoul, South Korea. I spent all night preparing for my first class. I tried to read everything I could about the culture and language of South Korea, and prepared what I thought would be a flawless first day lesson.

After a well-intended attempt at pronouncing everyone’s names correctly, I started the lesson by writing some opening sentences on the board. I wanted to use a student’s name for my sentence examples, and chose one that I felt confident in pronouncing. Turning to the whiteboard I grabbed my red marker and wrote, “Chae Lee is nice” followed by, “Chae Lee is a student.” Then I wrote, “Chae Lee likes school” (to model the third person verb), and then “Chae Lee has long hair.”

It was about this time that I noticed my class had become unusually quiet. Curious, I surveyed the classroom and saw that my chosen student, a young woman from the local university, had turned scarlet red, her eyes welling up with tears. Rather than make a big deal about it, I quickly decided to discretely offer a toilet-tissue roll, continue the lesson, and then work on damage control after class.

Once the bell rang, I immediately went up to Chae Lee, who had somewhat recovered her composure, and asked her about what had happened in class. With the aid of a pocket translator, she explained that in Korea, the color red, which I had used to write my sentences, signifies death. And to add insult to injury, writing one’s name in red is equivalent to placing a curse on them. She was embarrassed not only by my fault and then, in true Korean form, apologized for disrupting the class. I felt just awful, but learned from the experience and never ever brought a red board marker to class again.

We define communication as the exchange of information. But as teachers, we know there’s far more involved in the exchange of information than simply the exchange itself. The situation, context, culture, and even design of the information have to be taken into account as well. The world gets smaller every day and the need to communicate effectively within the world’s diverse cultural boundaries is growing. These unseen boundaries, while not physical, are as real as a river that runs between two countries, which we first have to define before we can safely cross.

A Country of Many Cultures

As our life experiences become more global, interaction with other cultures is no longer limited to foreign officials and diplomats. The United States is now much more like a microcosm of the world and each of us is functioning in the capacity of a diplomat within our own international environments.

The best examples of these localized worlds are our public school classrooms. Multicultural classes are now the norm rather than the exception. The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition reports that more than 4 million students enrolled in the U.S. public school system do not speak English as their first language. And while Spanish-language speakers represent three-fourths of the limited English proficient (LEP) student population, it is also common to have speakers of Vietnamese, Hmong, Korean, Chinese, Arabic, Russian, Navajo, Tagalog, Portuguese, or Serbo-Croatian, just to name a few. In fact, states reported more than 400 languages spoken by LEP students nationwide.

As a result, many teachers might feel a bit overwhelmed at times and are looking for ways to better appreciate new cultures and identities. In Culture and Social Behavior, Harry Triandis outlines four cultural syndromes that can help serve as a basis we can all use when trying to understand these cultural differences.

Complexity

Complexity deals with the distinctions between objects and events. An example of this idea would be the number of roles a person plays in life: mother, teacher, sister, wife, chairperson. Complexity also takes into consideration the number of occupations from which one can choose.

I taught for three years in Poland and was able to see how social, gender, and occupational roles differed between the Polish and U.S. cultures. During a lesson on occupations, I was surprised to discover that among the eight girls in my English class, almost half expressed a desire to be farmers when they grew up. The rest of them wanted to be doctors or engineers.

With more than half the jobs in Poland held by women, it was clear that the working mom was an integral part of the Polish economy. Later discussions revealed that not only is the Polish mother expected to raise the children and take care of the house, but many also held down two or more part-time jobs.

Individualism

When we give priority to our own personal goals instead of those of the groups in our lives (family groups, work groups) we are termed individualists. By definition, the United States is a very individualistic society. As such, this can be an issue when we attempt to construct cooperative learning groups or reading circles.

Because of their individualistic backgrounds, many American students are at odds with the idea of sharing answers within a cooperative learning group. Their individual goals often prompt students to shout proudly “I’m done!” as they complete a project before others, dramatically turning their papers...
Collectivism

The opposite of individualism, collectivism is measured by the strength of the group’s goals over those of the individual. In a collectivist culture, the individual is defined in terms of the group.

South Korea is a good example of a collectivist culture. For years, Korea was known as the hermit kingdom. Hundreds of years ago, the culture began turning inward, closing its doors as the result of countless invasions from abroad. The idea of not being a part of a group is an entirely foreign concept in Korea.

At a movie matinee in Seoul, I was one of maybe 10 people strewn about the cinema. I found a seat in the middle where I had the luxury of both armrests and settled in. About halfway into the opening scene a couple came in and sat next to me. Of all the seats available, why on earth did they choose to sit next to me?

After an uncomfortable hour and a half, I returned to school and brought up the incident in my evening class. “Of course, they sat next to you” was the class response. “You were alone, and it’s very sad to see someone sitting alone in a dark cinema. No one should have to be alone, even a stranger in a cinema.” It was the first time I became aware of how strongly a personal sense of individualism affects my everyday life.

Tightness

The extent of a culture’s tolerance is known as its tightness. Tightness refers to the distance one can deviate from the norms of a culture without actually offending anyone. Neglecting your Ps and Qs is construed as rude or unappreciative behavior in the United States, yet perfectly acceptable in some Eastern European countries.

I was complaining one day to a group of Polish college students how I felt sad sometimes because no one in Poland ever smiled. They in turn admitted that they thought Americans smiled too much! In America, everyone’s friend is their best friend, and most Americans have more than a few. In Poland, they explained, when someone smiles at you, it’s done with sincerity and open friendship. Smiles are special and thus reserved for your good friends.

It’s no wonder the bank teller always thought I was flirting with her. As with any culture, the difficulty comes in understanding what the norms are, and how tolerant the culture is with bending them.

The Future

The students of today are the business people of tomorrow. At some point in their lives they will be facing international situations both on business and social levels. Knowing how to define other cultures is the first step toward effective communication and thus more successful teaching.

Once we begin to look at other cultures, we can then turn toward creating a better understanding of our own culture and how others might see us from a different perspective.

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Additional Resources

National Association for Bilingual Education
www.nabe.org

National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition
www.ncela.gwu.edu

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc.
www.tesol.org

U. S. Department of Education Office of English Language Acquisition
www.ed.gov/oela
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Teams in Action

Connecting with Students on the Other Side of the World

Don Fought

Arriving home late one night from school, I learned from my wife that a gentleman had called, saying he knew me and desperately needed me to call him that evening.

“He said his name was Mr. Halsey,” she said. I did know a Robert Halsey, the former media center director of Southeast Middle School who retired my first year of teaching there.

Halsey and I had formed a strong relationship, based in part on our common love of travel. He and his wife had been Peace Corps volunteers before settling into careers, and I had traveled extensively in my previous career with several corporate firms. But that was more than five years ago. Why would he be calling now?

As it turned out, his son, Eric, a Peace Corps volunteer in Caracal, Romania, was looking for a teacher in North Carolina who would be interested in a cultural exchange program with a middle school in Caracal. Halsey recalled me telling him on several occasions that I wanted to participate in such a program with my social studies classes and immediately thought of me when his son presented the question.

I e-mailed Eric the next day, and so began our journey in a cultural exchange program. The irony? Throughout most of the prior month (September 2006), I had worked with our community’s Sister-City Organization to establish an exchange with a middle school in Furtwangen, Germany, but my contact in Furtwangen kept changing and nothing ever happened.

Rule #1 in a cultural exchange program: The quality of the program is only as good as the commitment and desire of your contact at the other end.

The Elements of Our Program

In our first e-mail exchange, Eric explained that the students at Nicolae Titulescu, a middle school in Caracal, a town of around 30,000 located in the southwestern corner of Romania, wanted to connect with American students. They wanted, among other things, to practice their English. We wanted to learn more about the culture of Europe, which we study as part of our sixth grade curriculum. Together, we mapped out a plan that began in November 2006 and has grown into a major program that my students love.

Our significant activities have been:

PowerPoint Intro. Students prepared PowerPoint presentations that they e-mailed to their sister school. As homework, students collected up to 15 photographs each that represented their culture (home, family, hobbies, and community). They scanned the photographs in the computer center and saved them on our server for access while they built their PowerPoint slides (four
slides per student). Students introduced themselves via bulleted text and provided narrative for their pictures. Our sister school reciprocated a few weeks later.

**Video Tour.** We prepared a video tour of our school and community. Students used a DVD camcorder and edited the footage with *Pinnacle Studio 11* software. Prior to shooting, students developed storyboards and a script that encompassed all aspects of a typical school day (academics, lunch, sports). The video also captured various points of interest around our community. We sent the DVD to Romania, and they responded in several weeks with their own DVD. Consequently, we have made video production a frequent activity in our program, taping activities from school events to book talks, and special events such as the live owl show that visited our school. Video production is a wonderful 21st century learning tool for students and a great way to share global culture.

**Pen Pal Exchange.** A staple of our program has been our pen pal exchange. My Romanian counterpart and I collaborated to assign each student a pen pal, matching students by gender. Every three weeks, students write letters to their assigned pen pal. Letters sent and received are archived in a shared file on the server, making it easy for students to recall previous exchanges. In essence, students create an ongoing conversation, each letter building off the previous. I review all letters before sending them, and the activity doubles as a writing and grammar exercise. What has developed is meaningful cultural learning between pen pals.

**Parent and Community Involvement.** We designed a way to share our program with parents and our community. We treat parents and guests to European Delights Night. Students prepare and serve buffet style an authentic European dessert. Students then share pictures of their sister school. I will always remember one father’s comment after last year’s event: “My wife dragged me here. She knows I hate school events, but when I experienced what my child is learning and his excitement, tears came to my eyes. I was so proud!”

**Webcasts.** Most significant are our monthly live Webcasts. We use Skype (www.skype.com) and a basic Webcam with microphone and external speakers. We arrange for a convenient log-in time and use the media center to project images to a large screen. At our most recent session, our friends taught us some basic Romanian.

**Teachers Teaching Teachers**

We also encourage teachers to exchange ideas. Jane Trace, the math/science teacher on our team, exchanged with our sister school suggestions and ideas about how math and science are approached in our middle schools. This complemented our overall work on establishing a cultural exchange. Specifically, she shared in several teacher-to-teacher Webcast sessions, how we approach math concepts such as numbers theory and probability. Our team also gained new ideas on how to teach math. In Romania, they tend to teach advanced math components earlier in the education system than we do.

Jane also documented in pictures and text how our team approaches science. Of particular interest to our sister school was our team interdisciplinary unit on ecology. She assembled video of a live owl show, the dissection of owl pellets, and other hands-on science activities for our sister school to see, experience, and better understand how we do a common lesson across our team subjects.

Pleasant surprises also come from a program like this. In April, a package arrived from our sister school. Inside were 30 amulets representing Romania’s March Amulet tradition of a red thread and white thread twisted and tied to a flower symbolizing the end of winter (red for cold) and the start of a new season (white for spring). Men present these gifts to women across Romania on March 1 as a show of caring, so our friends wanted each boy in our classroom to have one to give to each girl.

**Starting Your Own Program**

Southeast Middle School has reaped many benefits from its cultural exchange program and is actively seeking ways to expand to other schools and communities. We highly recommend it as a curricular activity to extend or supplement current activities or to offer as a cocurricular program or club.

The obvious starting point for anyone interested in doing something similar is finding a sister school. Although ours came to us in a unique way, there are more universal ways to find a sister-school.

First, check to see if your community has a sister-city organization or an already-established relationship with a community. If not, explore www.globalgateway.org.uk. It offers a wealth of ideas and you can list your school and preferences for a sister school.

Not ready for a two-way exchange? There are interactive sites that still get kids involved in learning about other cultures, even collaborating and sharing ideas. Two great sites are www.bridgesweb.org and www.facingthefuture.org.

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There are so many odd and unfamiliar words in the digital world. It’s a whole new language, in fact. Every day we hear words and phrases like Wiki, Blog, Twitter, Podcast, YouTube, Google, Facebook, MySpace. And now we can add Ning to this ever-growing list of 21st century learning words. For those unfamiliar with this word, a Ning is a social networking tool that has similarities with other social networking communities such as Facebook and MySpace. But what exactly does Ning mean? I Googled it (another new verb to add to our vocabulary!) and I learned that Ning is Chinese for “peace.” This got me thinking....

What does “peace” have to do with social networking? To me, social networking seems to be anything but peaceful; social networking brings to my mind activity and action, the buzz of conversation, and ideas galore! As I continued on my pursuit of meaning, I decided to look up “peace” in the dictionary and low and behold, one of its meanings cleared up my confusion:

Peace: a state of mutual harmony between people or groups: used to express greeting or farewell

That’s it! A Ning is not a peaceful place but a place of peace. A place where active discussion and sharing facilitates a state of mutual harmony (and I suggest “understanding” as well).

How neat it is to think of a Ning as a greeting place between educators. I like that. Now I feel better. This Ning thing finally makes sense to me!

Network Connections

According to educator Steven Hargadon, social networking communities are “collections of Web 2.0 technologies combined in a way to help build online communities.” Although many education-based communities such as Classroom 2.0 were originally created for adults (www.classroom20.com), teachers just have to think back to what they know about the key role social constructivism has in learning and they will realize that productive, thought-provoking dialog with others in a community is beneficial for learners of all ages.

What is a social network? The short video clips at www.commoncraft.com/show will introduce you to the basics. You can also access videos about blogging, wikis, social media, and Twitter (www.twitter.com). When you are ready, create a Ning at www.ning.com. Develop your own social network; add photos, videos, and blogs. Some of the education-related social networks on Ning address the areas of Education Technology, Education is Power (K–12 education issues), and Education 2.0. Educators interested in using a Ning social networking platform in education can learn more at http://education.ning.com
Who, Why and How?

Research from the National School Boards Association (NSBA) indicates that 96% of students with online access report using social networking such as chatting, text messaging, blogging, and other online community technologies. Even more surprising is the research that reveals that 60% of students who use social networking "talk about education topics online and, surprisingly, more than 50% talk specifically about schoolwork."

Read NSBA's thought-provoking national research study, Creating and Connecting: Research and Guidelines on Online Social and Educational Networking at www.nsba.org/SecondaryMenu/LMN/CreatingandConnecting.aspx

What are educators using social networking sites for? Nancy Williard, director of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use, brings educators up to date on social networking tools at www.education-world.com/a_issues/issues423.shtml, including how to make sure students know how to navigate social networks safely.

Then, check out http://socialnetworksined.wikispaces.com for a list of social networks in education, including information about how educators are using Nings in educational environments. Here's just a sampling:

EduBloggerWorld:
www.edubloggers.ning.com

Gifted Education Ning:
www.giftededucation.ning.com

Global Classroom:
www.globalclassroom.us

International Classroom:
www.internationalclassroom.ning.com

Next Generation Teachers:
www.nextgen.ning.com

Professional Development 2.0:
www.newlearning.ning.com

Where kids are concerned, you might want to visit www.imbee.com, which promotes itself as the “first secure social networking and blogging destination for kids” and promises to be parent-approved and appropriate for kids and young adolescents. This teacher-endorsed social networking site offers free accounts for educators.

Also of interest to students is Elgg, an open-source social networking site aimed particularly at an education audience. This “learning landscape” supports learning by providing students with their own Weblog, a file repository (with podcasting capabilities), and an online profile.

Deemed a smart network, Elgg offers a high degree of control by allowing the user or the teacher-administrator of the space choice over who can access the content. Check it out at http://elgg.org

Wondering why students use Facebook and MySpace when it seems just as easy to give their friends a call to catch up? Vanessa VanPetten, 23, explains it very well in her YouTube video, Why Do Teens Use Social Networking Sites? Visit http://youtube.com/watch?v=g6YI6sEDZIE and get the story.

Be Safe Out There

If you are not convinced about the safety of social networking, visit http://teachdigital.pbwiki.com/safedsn, where Wesley Fryer offers a gold mine portal of resources for those interested in navigating the sometimes controversial water of using social networking tools within an educational context.

"Simply banning read/write web tools on school networks is an inadequate response: Educators must strive to learn alongside students and parents how these technologies can be safely and powerfully used to communicate and collaborate," he says.


He says, “One of my biggest worries has always been that by denying access in school to technologies that students find useful and meaningful, we make school more and more irrelevant to our ‘Net Genners.”

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Notes on Note Taking

Don’t ask middle level students to take notes during a lecture or first-learning experience. In most situations, it’s not a good idea.

When we ask students to record meaningful notes while listening with full concentration to our lecture (or watching the lab demonstration or video, or paying attention to the docent on a field trip to the museum), we dilute both experiences.

While recording what a political candidate says in a speech, for example, the student misses the candidate’s vocal inflections and body language that reveal his yet unspoken position on a controversial issue. While wrapped up in a compelling story from the teacher about the Cambrian explosion of new life forms over 500 million years ago, the student struggles to get it all down in a memorable way on paper, and by that point, the teacher has moved on to the next topic.

The brain operates by toggling back and forth between two or more foci, according to John Medina in *Brain Rules*, not by paying full attention to multiple sources of input simultaneously. It turns out that multi-tasking is harder than we thought, even for today’s supposedly multi-tasking generation.

It becomes particularly troubling for students who have any kind of auditory processing issue or learning disability. It’s so overwhelming for these students, in fact, they resort to one of three responses: 1) Give up and accept a failing grade on the next day’s quiz on this material; 2) Tune out and realize they’ll have to learn it later on their own; or 3) Act up in class out of frustration. In short, they’re drowning.

We can ease this burden for all students, not just the ones with learning challenges, by handling note-taking wisely.

**Pencils Down**

First, we ask students to put their pens, pencils, and keyboards away while we are lecturing, demonstrating, showing a video, or making any other kind of presentation. We want their full attention. We want them to wrestle with the ideas, fully engaged in the effort to understand what’s being presented, not in translating the material for later study.

Reading expository text is also a learning or presentation experience, so this means students read written text all the way through with their pens and pencils down. The first read-through is just to consider the ideas, maybe question them, but not to capture them.

There’s an important element to this approach, however: Our presentation or written text must be broken into segments. We should present (or let students read) information for 10–15 minutes, then stop and ask students to process the information for 2–7 minutes. We continue to lecture or present for another 10–15 minutes, then stop and ask students to process again for another 2–7 minutes. We continue like this until the end of the period or the end of the presentation. This chunked approach allows students to fully engage in the presentation without having to process an overwhelming amount of material.

If the measure of our teaching success is the degree to which students learn the material, finishing the lecture within the class period pales in comparison to making sure students remember what they learn. This means we have to be strong enough in our teaching convictions to chunk our lectures and presentations and let students process the information for long-term memory several different times, even if this means we don’t have time to finish the presentation.

Some students will feel anxious with this “pencils down and listen to the lecture” approach. They will be afraid that they will lose the information unless they write it down right away. This is understandable, so allow students to record 10–12 single words or phrases during each of those segments. These are words that caught their attention, concepts they thought were important, something they didn’t understand, or something about which they have a comment. This list provides the reference points to which students can return during the processing period to record full, accurate notes for later study.
Processing Learning

During those breaks between information segments and any time students take notes, there are many ways for students to process their learning. Here are some effective strategies:

Double-entry journals. Students record information, samples, charts, or tables on the left side of their paper or notebook and apply the knowledge on the right side through comparisons, practice exercises, mindmaps, recoding of information, and other creative learning prompts.

Note cards. Students record notes on index cards following a prescribed format such as labeling each card in the upper right-hand corner with its source and page, keeping the center of the card for information on just one topic within a larger topic, and labeling the upper left-hand corner for the topic’s label.

Matrix. Students begin taking notes by first constructing a grid with squares in which they will record their notes. Across the top might be attributes in different categories but along the side might be different topics. For instance, we might list biomes along the vertical axis, but across the top might be: Primary Water Source, Sample Food Chain, Where Located, Typical Temperature Range, Three Typical Plants, 1 Unique Feature.

Fishbone. Students record the main topic horizontally down the length of the paper, then provide lines shooting off that mid-line in a herringbone style on which they record sub-topics of the main idea. Each of these can be further broken down into smaller herringbone lines shooting off those first lines.

Power Thinking. Students record notes on small slips of paper two or three inches in length. Main topics are labeled as Power 1 level. Anything that’s a sub-topic of the larger topic is labeled as Power 2. Anything that clarifies or supports Power 2 sub-topics is considered Power 3. After recording notes on these slips, students then arrange them on their desks or tables with their fingers, placing everything within its proper hierarchy. (This idea is from Differentiating Textbooks by Char Forsten, Jim Grant, and Betty Hollas.)

Who, What, When, Where, Why, How, and What This Means to Me. Students set up a chart with these prompts prior to taking notes, then respond to each one of them as they process information. (This is based on an idea from Elaine Stephens and Jean Brown in A Handbook of Content Literacy Strategies.)

Note-taker’s Critique. Provide students with examples of other students’ notes on a topic. These can come from photocopying previous students’ efforts in your class or by creating mock notes yourself. Make sure to have a variety of degrees of successful note-taking to share. Then ask students to critique the notes in light of what they’ve just learned: Are the notes accurate, comprehensive, and clear? If not, ask students to correct them so they meet the criteria you’ve outlined for successful notes.

Your Importance/Author Importance. The readers determine the importance of anything they read. To help students avoid focusing on the wrong thing, however, ask them first to read through text and record what they find important to themselves. You might even ask them to delineate these ideas in two columns: Things of Interest to Me and Things I Think Are Important. Then ask students to re-read the text, but this time they must focus on what they think the author thought was important and why they think as they do. This exercise, based on an idea from Strategies that Work (2nd edition), by Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis, helps students key in on salient concepts.

A great way for students to figure out what’s truly important for them to record in their notes is for them to create a topic sentence and to identify the purpose for the study. For this section of this column, for example, my topic sentence would be, “There are many ways for students to take notes.” Anything they record in their notes would support that topic.

Notes That Work

Great middle level teachers never assume students are successful note-takers. They provide overt explanations and demonstrations of good note-taking throughout the year. They invite students to go back and revise their notes later in the day or week, heeding Bob Marzano and his colleagues’ message in Classroom Instruction That Works, that, “Notes should be considered a work in progress” (p. 44).

We should consider students taking notes during class and while they study as something more than a classroom management strategy. It’s an effective instructional practice if done correctly, and as students achieve academic success by using those notes, we should frequently remind them of the power of their note taking. Many of them might even come to value the process and use it even when it’s not required. Okay, maybe that’s a stretch, but some will undoubtedly become “noted” scholars, a status eagerly sought. And the others? They remain noteworthy.

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Mark of Leadership

Balancing Technology: Moving at the Speed of Light

Tom Burton

It may sound heretical, but I’ve become a little concerned with technology and its lack of balance with simpler things. Perhaps it was the presenter who was busy checking his Blackberry throughout his presentation, or maybe it was the cell phones I confiscated during school because students were text messaging, or maybe it was the 28 pages of instant messages that I reviewed during a recent discipline situation. However, these instances of technological overload didn’t affect me on a personal level; it was my own children discussing who would use the computer when they got home that led me to reevaluate my stance on technology. While there is no doubt that we need to prepare our students and children for the 21st century, we need to do so by providing a balance.

I want my children and the students at Cuyahoga Heights Middle School to be able to utilize technology for success in the highly competitive, highly technical global economy. However, I also want them to be able to interact, face-to-face, with a classmate and eventually a supervisor, customer, or co-worker. I want them to be able to take enjoyment from the physical world. I want them to investigate their surroundings through curious experimentation. Students of the new millennium must be turning over rocks with the same ease that they use Google.

In the past several weeks, I have heard parents say “all she does is play video games” or “he is always on the computer,” yet they complain that their son or daughter struggles to get along with others or doesn’t have friends. While the answer might be to simply get off of the computer and explore the larger world, the obstacle is that someone on the other end of the digital line is always willing to talk.

At a recent dinner with friends, I heard the conversation turn to technology and how the world would stop without it. I wondered: would it be all that bad to not have the daily connectivity to which we have grown so accustomed?

Despite my occasional longing for simpler times of fishing holes and games of kick the can, I know that as educators, we need to ensure that students are using technology daily to stay innovative and globally competitive. In doing so, however, we need to understand that technology is a tool, not a goal. If our students don’t understand the right questions to ask or issues to investigate, no amount of search engine prowess will help them.

Reality Check

At the beginning of last school year I showed the video clip Did You Know: Shift Happens to the teachers, parents, and the Leadership Council. (You can view the video, its updated Did You Know 2.0, and various adaptations by going to www.youtube.com and searching for Shift Happens.) The five-minute thought-provoking journey uses many statistics to illustrate the main point that the world is changing at a remarkable speed. For example, the video reports:

1. In 2002 alone, Nintendo invested more than $140 million in research and development. The U.S. Federal Government spent less than half as much on research and innovation in education.
2. There were more than 100 million registered users of MySpace in August 2006. If MySpace were a country, it would be the 11th-largest in the world (between Japan and Mexico).
3. More than 2.7 billion searches are performed on Google each month.
4. The amount of new technical information is doubling every two years. It’s predicted to double every 72 hours by 2010.
5. About 47 million laptops were shipped worldwide last year. The $100 laptop project is expecting to ship between 50 and 100 million laptops a year to children in underdeveloped countries.

6. By 2023, a $1,000 computer will exceed the computation capability of the human brain.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 62 million U.S. households, or 55% of American homes, had a Web-connected computer in 2003, that’s up from 50% in 2001, and more than triple 1997’s 18% figure. More recent statistics suggest that 70% of American households are connected.

The point is quite simple: more children are exposed to technology at an early age than ever before. They aren’t just using computers; they are playing complicated gaming systems, using digital cameras, using cell phones for texting, and so forth. We must realize that students are coming to school already comfortable with technology.

If we haven’t yet altered our teaching methodologies, we need to change them to include opportunities for using some form of technology on a regular basis. While I recognize that there are potential road blocks, notably financial ones, I believe that there are many solutions and possibilities, and we owe it to our students to use all of the educational tools that we have at our disposal.

At a conference several years ago, one of the attendees, a principal, was talking about the fact that his school was getting a new fully stocked computer lab. He was quite excited about the increased exposure to technology and the positive impact on students.

One our colleagues asked him what programs were going to be installed on the computers and what type of professional development he was providing for the teachers. Unfortunately, he was unable to answer either question. Far too often, this is true. We proceed at the speed of light without the relevant knowledge or a plan on how to integrate technology.

**With a Plan in Mind**

While most of us are excited about the technology that’s coming into our schools, unless we have an implementation plan that involves input from all stakeholders, the technology may not be used effectively.

If, as educators, we are to successfully integrate technology into already sound teaching practices, we need to consider the following points with the long-term goal of overall technological effectiveness and balance.

**Take your time.** With so many tremendous software programs available, it is easy to get caught up in the “paralysis of analysis” and not move anywhere. Conversely, and perhaps even worse, we jump into the newest, best program each year without a professional development program to allow all users to become comfortable using the program. One way to avoid this pitfall is to survey students and staff to gauge their readiness level. Based on the results, develop a professional development plan and an integration plan.

**Look for opportunities.** As funding has dwindled in many states, the ability to purchase technology has become more difficult. Many companies have a three- or five-year cycle for replacing computers. They often donate them to charity; why not to your school? Joe Palazzo, district coordinator of technology at Cuyahoga Heights, recently secured over $200,000 worth of computers by developing a relationship with a local business.

In addition to donations from the business community, I have found that potential vendors are a great resource for finding funding. Often they have helped other schools find money through grants to purchase new or used equipment.

**Create a Balance**

Bucky Covington, a singer and songwriter of American Idol fame, released “A Different World” last spring. An instant hit, the song details simpler times, when we “had three TV channels you got up to change, no video games and no satellite, all we had were friends and they were outside.”

While technology has given countless millions access to information and various other benefits, my position is that we need to be somewhere between Bucky Covington and Bill Gates as we provide challenging experiences to prepare our students for the ever-changing world.

Tom Burton is principal of Cuyahoga Heights Middle School in Ohio. E-mail TBurton@cuyhts.k12.oh.us

I want students to investigate their surroundings through curious experimentation. Students of the new millennium must be turning over rocks with the same ease and curiosity that they use when they turn to Google to explore the world around them.
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Reviews & Resources

How To Survive (And Perhaps Thrive) on a Teacher’s Salary

I was so excited when I was asked to review a book that could help me figure out how to save money when all we are having in Florida are budget cuts. How another Florida teacher was able to thrive on a teacher’s salary intrigued me.

For the most part, the author does an effective job of getting his point across that teachers earning a teacher’s salary can save money—lots of money. Kofke says that he “was blessed with some good fortune,” but along the way “took some risks and worked hard” (pg. 13). Part of his good fortune was that he was able to borrow money, interest-free, from his grandmother for his engagement ring, his wedding, and his first house. Not too many teachers I know have that resource at their disposal.

Still, Kofke and his wife lived very frugally. They shared one car, for example. They budgeted an allowance for the week, and if it was gone on Wednesday, they went without. While I enjoy saving money, I also enjoy living in the here and now and don’t know that I could have lived that way. In my eyes, they deprived themselves of ordinary life experiences.

Yet, I learned quite a bit about budgeting, paying yourself first, setting both long-term and short-term goals, and paying down credit cards. The book has some great suggestions and is both motivating and enlightening.

This book is a great read for beginning teachers. For those of us who seem beyond repair in the savings department, this book does offer one chapter about how to try and recover from debt issues.

I definitely would recommend this book to others, but I would target younger teachers just starting out in the teaching field—perhaps providing it as a new teacher gift from a principal or school district.

Reviewed by Karen Ashton, an eighth grade teacher at Dr. John Long Middle School in Pasco County, Florida.

Creating Welcoming Schools—A Practical Guide to Home-School Partnerships with Diverse Families

If you feed them, they will come. Many schools have chosen to implement this mantra in an attempt to strengthen their relationships with the home. Back-to-school barbecues, muffins for moms, doughnuts for dads—food for the families we strive to partner with in educating their children. Food does bring people to the school, but how does a school sustain a partnership with diverse families?

JoBeth Allen offers practical solutions to this problem in her book, Creating Welcoming Schools. Parents, aspiring teachers, teachers, administrators, and community members will all find methodologies that resonate with them.

The starting point may be, “How do we really want families to be involved in our school?” The next step is “Now that we know what we want, how do we develop partnerships that will last and benefit the students?”

This book serves as a handbook with proven methods focused on school communities that serve diverse populations. The strategies may transfer to a given school as is, or they may give rise to new ideas to change what is in print and make it specific for the school and the community/families it serves.

Regardless of your role, if you care about students and their learning, you know you must have support from home and the community to boost students’ chances for success in schools.

Creating Welcoming Schools is a resource you can go to again and again to help build this partnership in your own community.

Reviewed by Linda Williams, principal at Center Middle School in Kansas City, Missouri.
Differentiating Reading Instruction: How to Teach Reading to Meet the Needs of Each Student

Bestselling author Laura Robb brings forth her combined practical and theoretical knowledge from teaching and educational consulting to create an easy-to-use book for educators who are interested in developing effective differentiated reading practices that engage all learners.

Robb begins by addressing the problems associated with reading instruction; provides a sound theoretical framework as well as data that reveal how and why reading needs to be personally differentiated; and, most importantly, discusses how teachers can implement useful differentiated reading approaches that motivate students to become authentically engaged in reading.

She contends that to increase engagement, differentiated reading instruction must be carefully planned and include: (1) the use of read-alouds as the common teaching text in order to tap student prior knowledge and model learning strategies; (2) multiple texts focused on instructional reading around genres, issues, and topics; (3) 15 to 30 minutes of independent reading time three times a week geared toward reading for pleasure; (4) reading assignments tiered to match students’ needs based on their reading levels; (5) various group formats to discuss aspects of books read; and, (6) ongoing assessments such as response journals that help the teacher identify any gaps in students’ ability to comprehend, analyze, or make inferences.

The author provides practical examples, forms, rubrics, and unit plans of study that support the teacher implementation and scaffolding of authentically engaging reading practices to fit the needs of their own classrooms. These detailed “how-tos” make it easy for teachers to apply differentiated reading instruction throughout the year in conjunction with their normally scheduled courses. This book would prove useful for professional development purposes across the curriculum.

Reviewed by Lisa Winstead, an assistant professor in elementary and bilingual education at California State University, Fullerton.

New Teacher Training Falling Short

Teacher training may be falling short in two significant areas, according to a report published by Public Agenda and the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality. The report, Lessons Learned, suggests that new teachers are not prepared for the diversity of today’s American classrooms or for the challenges of teaching students with special needs.

Just over 75% of the teachers surveyed said that their training addressed the issue of ethnic diversity among students, but only 39% said that the training actually helped them significantly in the classroom.

Many new teachers also reported inadequate training with regard to teaching children with special needs. Most new teachers (82%) said their training covered the topic, but only 47% said it helped them a lot.

The survey covered 12 areas of teacher training, including direct instruction, public education policy debates, and philosophy. To download the report, visit www.publicagenda.org/lessonslearned3

Urban Parents and Education

The National School Boards Association’s Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE) recently surveyed more than 10,000 parents in 112 urban schools in 17 states to determine how they feel about their urban school environments—specifically bullying; expectations of student success; influence of race; parental involvement; safety; and trust, respect, and ethos of caring. Results of the survey included:

• Three quarters of the parents said that they visited their child’s school to support activities.

• The vast majority of parents said they believed their children were capable of performing very well on standardized exams and that their children would continue their education at the community college or university level.

• More than half of the parents surveyed said teachers have the ability to stop bullying. Parents with students in grades 6–8 were the largest group (nearly 11%) to report that their child was bullied during the school day at least once a month.

• About 70% of parents said race is not a factor in their children’s success in school.

Download the study, What We Think: Parental Perceptions of Urban School Climate, at www.nsba.org/whatwethink.pdf
“Effective professional learning is like a time-release capsule; its contents cannot be absorbed in a single day or week, but must be infused into the system over time to yield desired results in student achievement.”

—Staff developers Stephanie Hirsh and Joellen Killion. Education Week, April 14, 2008.

“The sooner we recognize that if we want teachers to treat our students with an ethic of care, we have to create school systems that treat teachers with an ethic of care. If people don’t believe that for ethical reasons, they should realize it for practical reasons, because if we keep on with our current model, we are never going to get enough of the teachers our students deserve.”


“...We’re not talking about computers as much as we once did in educational technology. Instead, we’re talking about what we plan on bringing to the kids via computers. As part of this trend, it becomes increasingly important to provide our students with a relevant environment for virtual learning.”


“We need to grow some new stewards. We need to introduce them to the ethics of taking care of public lands while they’re young.”

—Colorado National Monument Superintendent Joan Anselmo, commenting on the need to groom tomorrow’s “politically connected nature lovers.” The Denver Post, May 9, 2008.

“We squander the entrepreneurial spirit of children because we place such a high value on being right all the time. Students need to know that we value more than just being right all the time. We need to really honor their creativity, we need to honor their desire to learn useful skills that are going to be relevant in a 21st century world.”


“Adolescents will not grow up to be caring and compassionate adults of their own volition. Kids are not good or bad. Kids make good or bad decisions. The trick is to teach our children to treat each other with respect. We can do that by infusing decency and compassion into everything we do.”

—Sarah Shulkind, the principal of the middle school at Milken Community High School in Los Angeles, California. Teacher Magazine, April 28, 2008.

“If I had my druthers, I would not have an all-boys class at this age. Girls are young women at this age and the boys are babies who still believe in bathroom jokes.”

—Joseph DeCelles, English teacher at Umana Middle School Academy in East Boston, Massachusetts, where the school is experimenting with single-sex classes. DeCelles says he believes girls are good role models for boys in class because they are more mature. The Boston Globe, May 9, 2008.

“Abstinence from technology is a losing battle. To not teach technology use responsibly is neglecting the charge of universal education.”


“The realities we accept as obvious, neutral, objective, and simply ‘the way the world works’ are actually structures we create as we think and live. They are created by our rendition of history, our understanding of ourselves, of society, and of our world—and they are a partial view of the whole. Our individual knowledge is always limited, and we must be mindful of our own naïveté.”


“Now hold on a second — this is just eighth grade. So, let’s not go over the top. Let’s not have a huge party. Let’s just give them a handshake. You’re supposed to graduate from eighth grade.”


“There are kids for whom getting through eighth grade is a remarkable achievement: kids in foster care, the homeless kid who is constantly moving. That kid should have a party.”


“We’ve gotten used to customization in every other aspect of our lives. We have computers built to order... eyeglasses in an hour... and most Web sites know what I want before I do. Our schools must follow suit and become more agile, more efficient, more responsive... and most importantly, more effective.”

—U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, addressing the National Summit on Education Reform in June.
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The project described was supported by grant number ES010700 from the National Institutes of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), NIH. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official view of the NIEHS, NIH.
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