From Classroom to Community: A Rationale for

The Development of a Class Website and Blog

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The Importance of Integrating Information Technology in Today's Classroom

Curriculum development at its best should create an educational environment that not only provides information, but also appeals to each student's own educational goals and personal interests, while simultaneously serving the larger goals of society. Thus, substantive and catalytic curriculum development requires a re-examination of how we envision and create educational spaces. Creating this educational environment requires moving beyond what T. Tetsuo Aoki (1992) referred to as "understanding teaching as a black box." Schooling must provide more for students than a homogeneously assessed, pre-determined, one-size-fits-all model, or it will fall short of the expectations of the contemporary classroom. Educators must find a way to create a curriculum that, as John Dewey (1916) said, is driven by genuine student engagement in activities that have meaning to them and are perceived by them as being valuable. As Kathryn Moyle (2010) points out, it seems clear that most people find the virtual environment provided by digital media personally engaging and accessible. Schooling has not kept up with the increasingly important role digital media plays in all other aspects of society. If the people we wish to reach as educators inhabit digital places, then in order to effectively engage with them we must embrace the digital age and create communities of learning for those digital learners within the spaces provided by the digital world.

From Classroom to Community

The current trend in the English-speaking world towards the removal of class size limitations and the introduction of standardized exams in curricular delivery makes creating a schooling system that genuinely serves the needs and learning preferences of individual students challenging. As this is a trend that transcends political borders, it appears to be a direction in education that is going to remain an ongoing issue for some time to come. Although smaller classes and more teacher autonomy might generate an environment more conducive to meeting diverse learning needs, with the introduction of legislation like *Bill 22* in British Columbia, which moves toward removing class size limitations altogether, it seems only practical to find other potential avenues to help meet individual student requirements. The creation of "virtual learning environments" (Moyle, 2010,pp. 4-5) offer students the ability to learn at their own pace.

Currently in our society there is no universal common ground where people of all different cultures, social and economic groups, meet together intellectually in any routine or prolonged way, except in schools. It is difficult to create common ground in a multicultural society; by definition there are aspects of individual cultures that make them likely to isolate themselves from other groups. In a contemporary, ever more secular society, physical spaces where people of different races and economic groups all congregate together, are becoming increasingly limited. In order for individuals and society to benefit from the interaction of different cultures, social and economic groups, it is necessary for such a common meeting place

to exist. Will Kymlicka (1995) suggested that one of the fundamental challenges of the modern global community was to identify sources of unity. The evolution of the digital age offers an opportunity to create common ground, find sources of unity and develop what Margaret Wheatley referred to as communities of practice (2007) across cultural and geographic boundaries through the use of universally accessible information technology. If it is indeed necessary for a successful democratically-based global community to find common meeting places and sources of unity, then it seems short-sighted to not recognise the potential of the digital world to create those meeting places. Other arenas of the global community explore the potential of the digital world to create an environment capable of crossing cultural, social, and economic groups in shared digital communities. Social networking sites, and even video game and virtual reality sites like Second Life^{TM} creates spaces for diverse groups of people to meet and act together despite cultural, age, economic, religious , political or geographic differences. It is my goal to create a different kind of shared digital environment - a community of learners. This shared setting would remove the walls of my classroom and create a safe place of learning, available to my students, their parents and the on-line community as a whole.

Schooling has not embraced the digital revolution as quickly, seamlessly, or in the same way that the youth, social movements, culture and language have. As a global society we are experiencing massive changes in our social relationships due to digital media. The digital age has stimulated massive changes in language, industry, politics and social relationships. Language continues to evolve, with a constantly growing lexicon of text and digitally related language becoming part of the overall digital phenomena. For example, the recent political upheaval in the Middle East has been furthered significantly by the use of social media, and

Facebook^{TM} has become a world-wide phenomenon as described in a recent episode of *CBC's The Passionate Eye* (2012). These changes have not been equally or equitably echoed in the halls of learning, at least not those halls that all members of society are able to access.

Using a Website to Remove the Walls of My Classroom

Currently many educators are bound by the paper that they generate, by the walls of their classrooms, the mediums they use to teach and by the timetable of the school day. Technology is changing, and has the potential to change, the way education functions. In many ways, new communication technology is changing the way education manifests all together. Schooling, like education, should not be bound by the walls of a classroom; broader communities of learning develop using new production and communication technologies. Communication technology allows the creation of communities of like-minded people regardless of their physical location to each other and expands the ability of all of the stakeholders in an individual's learning experience to contribute to that process in a meaningful way.

Traditionally, schooling has taken place inside the physical institution of the school house. This physical construction has not changed significantly in structure or flexibility of organization since the turn of the last century. This serves the needs of many learners however; a significant body of research even before the full power of the digital age was felt, from Ted Margret Montessori (1912) to Aoki (1992), suggests that sometimes the walls of the a classroom can be an obstacle to learning. Research suggests, as common sense dictates, that children are more motivated to succeed academically if their parents play an active role in their

schooling (Ramirez, 2001). However, meaningful communication between parents and teachers may be inhibited by the conflicting work and school schedules of teachers and parents. Many parents are unable to come to the parent-teacher interviews scheduled twice a year because their work schedules prohibit it (Brock & Edmonds 2010). If it is true that students are more motivated to achieve if their parents are active participants in their education as is suggested by Ramirez (2001), then it is almost certainly desirable to attempt to engage parents in a more meaningful way than is created by two meetings a year. The inclusion of digital communication technology removes the barriers presented by work schedules, which may make attending structured parent-teacher meetings impossible (Bessell, et al. 2003).

Although the physical institution of a school is a valuable part of our social fabric, it is not capable of serving the needs of all students. This is not a criticism of the classroom teacher. There are a number of situations that make it impossible for some children to learn in or even regularly attend a traditional classroom. For example, many children suffer from illnesses while trying to finish their academic endeavours. Sometimes being able to work on academic pursuits provides a sense of normalcy in times of personal turmoil, when classroom attendance is impossible. These students may only be able to attend a traditional class setting part of the time. Further, some students from economically marginalized backgrounds, or facing difficult family environments, may have to work in order to support either themselves, or contribute to their families financially. Digital media provides an opportunity to allow a student, going through situations beyond their control, to remain in contact with their classroom communities and to attend class. As a result, is possible for them to fully participate as members of the community, to have the same access to information as everyone else. It is important that we

begin to explore ways of making education more flexible so it might better meet the diverse learning needs of students, rather than expecting students to be flexible in order to function within the current limiting structure of education.

Jerome G. Delaney (1999) suggests each student's individual learning needs should be considered in effective curricular development and that for a student centered learning environment to exist, "multiple pathways" (p. 268) to learning must be considered. In a digital age, these pathways must include a richer inclusion of digital media. The way that students communicate is evolving. Social media sites are responsible for forty-five percent of communication between students overwhelming even personal contact as the medium of choice for communication among school age children (Canada, 2012). As my classes continue to grow in size and diversity of learning needs, and as the way students communicate alters, meeting those needs and communicating in a way that is meaningful for my students has become increasingly challenging. Often challenges are the precursors of innovation. I believe that information communication technology may present the opportunity for me to be innovative and provide at least a partial solution to those challenges created by meeting the needs of learners born into the digital age.

Creating a Community of Learners in a Digital Environment

The creation of my website serves multiple educational purposes. The website I have created, in effect, replaces the need for students to have access to a physical textbook. It also eliminates the need for me to worry about the potential cost of purchasing new textbooks, in addition to ameliorating the environmental impact of textbook production, and educational limitations and inherent obsolescence of textbook production. However, the shift to a digital age

comes with a new set of environmental concerns. While it is crucial that we remain sensitive to the ripples caused environmentally and pedagogically by the shift to a digital age, concern for the impact of these changes in society should not stop us as educators from finding a way to integrate the opportunities presented by digital technology in a positive and beneficial way to our personal praxis. As more information is added to the curriculum or as the content of the classes I teach changes, I can update the content of my site accordingly. New communications technology creates the potential for the development of new intellectual communities of practice (Wheatley & Frieze, 2007). The website I have created takes advantage of these opportunities through the inclusion of a blog. A study by Herring, et al. in 2004 found that since the middle of 1999 the use of blogging as a method of communication has increased rapidly. Blogs take advantage of the potential of an entirely new way of interacting. The inclusion of a blog in my class website removes the time constraints that hamper parent-teacher interaction and allows the opportunity for more meaningful involvement of parents as members of a digital learning community (Herring, 2004). The integration of digital communication technology particularly the use of weblogs extends communication beyond the classroom and creates a digital environment where many people are able to share ideas and make contributions. (Weiler, 2003)

A classroom blog allows learners to communicate both with me and with each other. The inclusion of a blog also allows my students parents to participate more fully as partners in their children's learning, and as members of the class's community of practice. They can follow the progress of the class by checking the website and communicate directly to the class community by using the blog. In a 2011 study by Zhang and Hatcher, it was determined that the

use of blogs and email communication with parents acted to enhance parent-teacher communication. The addition of a class blog to my class website generates some concerns regarding privacy and appropriateness of content. The class blog is currently completely open and I would like to leave it accessible to the digital community as a whole. It is possible to limit membership of the class blog to my current students and their parents; however I would like to leave the blog as an open avenue of communication. Leaving the blog open to the global digital community of the World Wide Web allows the potential of the learning community I am attempting to facilitate be global in scope. Part of the benefit of creating a website with a blog is the ability to access a wider community of experts than exists within the walls of a school. However there must be mechanisms in place that act to deal with potential issues of inappropriate content and concerns regarding privacy. There is a privacy function inside of the blog management section of the site that allows comments to be posted only after I have approved them. If it becomes necessary I will institute this restriction. A drawback with this, from my perspective, is that it would significantly reduce the ability of other members of the learning community to connect in a meaningful way. Their ability to interact would be less utile and more time consuming. The only personal information that is posted in a manner accessible by all of the blog users is the name of those people commenting in the blog, if this became an issue of concern then initials or nicknames could be generated for student users. I currently have the blog set up to notify me if any one generates a comment, so I am able to follow a conversation in real time. If a conversation became inappropriate at any time I could disallow the participants from posting, or reset the filter to disallow any posts without my permission. I would like to experiment with trusting the intellectual community I am creating a home for, before I restrict their ability to communicate with each other.

I currently email parents weekly updates of their student's progress; the creation of a website with all of the course assignments available online allows parents to cross reference the information in their emails with the content of the website and then post comments or questions on the blog. In this way parents have the opportunity to become more active partners in the education of their children. The use of blogs, e-mails and other digitally based communication techniques have the advantage of being a potentially more frequent method of communication between teacher and parent (Zhang, 2011).

Technology also presents the ability to serve the needs of my increasingly diverse classroom. For learners with vision issues the text can be expanded to meet their individual needs. I strongly believe my website offers learners who have processing issues the time to reassess everything covered in class, at home. For students missing school due to serious illness, family issues, travel or outside educational opportunities, the website would provide them with the opportunity to stay caught up or forge ahead academically, even if the routine of a school schedule is temporarily impossible to maintain. Students and students whose parents have English as a second language can use the translation technology available for free on line to enhance their understanding of the class content or better communicate by using the blog. Technology may present a medium of communication that is more accessible to a wide variety of students and families who fall outside of the mainstream of class composition (Bessell, et al. 2003).

There are a number of practical benefits and efficiencies associated with the creation of my website. I will not have to keep multiple copies of assignments. As I create them, I can post them on my website, if a student misses an assignment, they can access it on the website. If

students wish to find what questions are required for a specific lesson and I am unavailable or it is outside of school hours, they can check the website. Students will not have to worry about losing their assignment criteria or misplacing, or forgetting their text book, as all of the material they need for class will always be available on-line. This website creates an environment more capable of flexibility and more able to meet the mosaic of needs represented by my students than the traditional classroom model is capable of doing alone.

Proposed content of my website

It seems reasonable to assume, given the massive potential for positive change that digital media represents, that this is an area worthy of exploration. The website I have constructed allows students to access all of the information they need to complete the Prescribed Learning Outcomes for Social Studies 11 in BC, with or without classroom instruction. Using classroom textbooks, digital media and the Integrated Resource Package for Social Studies 11 as sources of information, I have created a series of lessons in the form of Power Point presentations. These lessons include three primary units; government, Canadian history and social geography. The government unit includes lessons on; political systems, the structure and function of Canadian government and the relationship between the state and the Canadian citizen. The history units lesson plans cover; early twentieth century history, Canadian involvement in World War I, the interwar years in Canada, including the development of the third party system, the causes and effects of the Great Depression and the origins of the welfare state, Canada's involvement in World War II, the impact of the Holocaust, the history of immigration in Canada, French-English relations in Canada, including the Quiet Revolution and the Quebec Crisis, the issues surrounding the First Nations Peoples of Canada, the path of

women's liberation in Canada, Canada's role in the Cold War and Canada's role in the post- Cold

War era. The geography unit contains lessons on; global population the demographic transition

model, the Human Development Index and its role in determining the status of a nation's

development and the impact of human interaction with the physical, biological and economic

systems of the global community. Each lesson has embedded within it questions designed to

generate critical thinking. I have also posted a series of questions designed to scaffold off of the

lessons on the site. These questions might be utilized in a variety of ways. The questions could

be done collaboratively in class, or used as the basis for preparation during summative

assessment. The site also includes a blog to allow for student feedback and peer review. This

permits the questions posed on the site to be used in a completely digital community as the

basis for a digital conversation to take place outside the walls of the classroom.

Practical considerations

I explored the various options available and found that there are a significant number

of places that will host webpages without a user fee. I would like to maintain this site as a free

service to anyone who wishes to use it to learn. I have limited resources, it is important that the

site I create does not cost me any money to maintain. I also wanted a website that was

independent of an individual school, or district server. This ensures that I am able to continue

to provide my website on my terms, that I can make it available to anyone free of charge and

that I retain control over the rights to the content on the website. If I ever change school

districts or alter my employment status, I would like to have the ability to retain control of my

website. Some sites that host websites free of charge retain proprietary rights over material

posted there. Google for example, retains the option to exert proprietary rights over material

posted on websites that they host. I have decided to use *weebly.com* as the host for my site. This allows me to maintain control of the material that I develop and if I wish to move my site to a different server sometime in the future, I do not have to be concerned regarding ownership of the material on the site. The host site *weebly.com* is very user friendly in the way it is designed, this allows my website I to be very organic. It is essential that I am able to alter the content of my website whenever and where ever I happen to be. If I use a school or district server then I would only be able to upload files or alter the content of the site when I was in the school building. The organic nature of this website will not only allow me to alter the content of the site as the curriculum changes, as I determine the impact of the site on my teaching, or as my teaching assignment changes, I will have the ability to alter my site accordingly.

Digital technology is the way of the future for education

Recently, CBS news did a story on the success of the Khan Academy (2012), which is a free educational site that links digital lessons with an overall support site. It has been used millions of times and is now being promoted by Bill Gates. It advocates the development of a flipped classroom. In this paradigm students study material that would normally by disseminated during a classroom lecture at home and then work on their critical thinking skills inside the classroom doing individual, small and large group activities. The website that I propose to create would provide the opportunity to explore new innovations in teaching, like the flipped classroom. Students could take notes at home from the lessons posted on the site, develop a series of higher order questions based on their notes and use them as the basis for discussion in class the next day. Alternatively the lessons have built in higher order activities that could be used as either enrichment activities or in preparation for small, medium or large

group discussions during class. The individual lessons are also hyperlinked into video and contain other types of multimedia; both utilize the power of images to reinforce concepts and to engage student interest. Access on-line to all of the information necessary for academic success in class, allows the students the opportunity to absorb it at a pace that is comfortable for them, as individuals. All of these concepts are synergistic with the idea of promoting a learner centred environment (Delaney, 1999) and are highly adaptable to meet the changing needs of schooling. The purpose of this website is not to replace the role I play as facilitator in the community of the classroom, rather it is meant to enhance that role. It is intended to act as a tool to enrich an interactive and engaged classroom environment. Like a well-constructed text book or lesson plan, utilizing a website as the only method or avenue into student interest would eliminate the spontaneity and joy of the moments of epiphany inherent in an engaged inclusive and involved learning community. The creation of a website with a blog also serves my needs as a teacher as Bushweller (2006) states digital technology acts to "streamline educators' workloads, allowing them to bypass paperwork by posting class content, notices for parents, ad other pertinent information online" (p.45). It is not designed to be utilized without the inclusion of the class community; a true class community requires communication between individuals. Privacy considerations must be contemplated whenever personal information is posted in a digital environment. In utilizing the website and blog to enrich parent, teacher, student communication privacy concerns regarding individual student information, should be addressed by combining emails to individual parents with the ability to cross reference posts on the website blog. This means that no personal information regarding an individual student's grade is ever posted online.

Benefits of a class website specific to Social Studies

The creation of a website is of particular importance as I want to more fully integrate information technology into my social studies course. The World Wide Web can be a dangerous place. In order to provide an environment where students can safely access valuable information on-line, students need some guidance. As James P. Shaver points out anyone can create a website, the content is not necessarily controlled by experts and there is no valid review process. By creating my own website I am able to assess the multimedia that I embed within the site. This provides my students with access to the digital opportunities for enrichment without subjecting them to the dangers of websites with content that is inappropriate or full of misinformation. The curriculum of a Social Studies class presents some particularly challenging issues if digital information technology is integrated into class study. Many of the subjects covered in a social studies class are politically sensitive and there is detrimental and misleading information available on-line. A significant amount of teacher assistance is necessary to ensure that credible appropriate material is examined in relationship with the class's acquisition of knowledge. A teacher designed website allows student access to imagery useful in inquiry based learning (Shaver, 1999) without subjecting them to the dangers navigating available digital technology on their own. Designing a class website and integrating technology more fully into the classroom allows students to access the rich archives of primary resource documents available on line in a safe environment without having to try and navigate through the massive amount of digital information available to them. (Mason, 2000)

Conclusions

The usefulness of websites designed by educators to meet student's needs and better incorporate parents as educational partners in a community of learning seems clear. The success of creating a website that provides the opportunity for student feedback and is designed to engage a digitally savvy generation has manifested in reality, with the development of sites like the Khan Academy. The development of large-scale change happens slowly and emerges from the development of small scale communities of practice. (Wheatley & Frieze, 2007) I am inspired by the potential the digital world has to enrich the way we communicate and connect with each other and I want to find a way to integrate this new virtual world with my professional praxis. I want to explore the possibilities for enriching the learning experience I am capable of providing to the learners of the twenty-first century. This is the future of education, the ability to marry the role of the classroom teacher with the educational opportunities presented by the digital revolution.

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