

The Connected Teacher ■

powering up

Voices From The Learning Revolution

Copyright © 2012 by Powerful Learning Practice, LLC

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing, 2012

ISBN 978-0-9854089-0-9

Powerful Learning Press

4068 Bridgehampton Lane

Virginia Beach, Virginia 23455

www.powerfullearningpress.com

How To Use This eBook

Throughout this book there are many opportunities to further the reading experience. In each section, words that are both colored and underlined are interactive links that will present more information, examples or related media. Also, on the next two pages you will find an interactive table of contents. To skip directly to a specific section simply hover over the text for that section and left-click.

Contents

Foreword & Introduction

Flipping the Switch

The Courage to Change

Will My Third Graders Be Educated When They Grow up?

My First Year of Teaching Dangerously

Making the Shift: Teachers Learning from Teachers

Becoming a Techy Teacher

Some Tips for Getting Started

Feeling the Current

Igniting the Heart of Learning in the Collaborative Age

Confessions of a Closet Constructivist

Ah, Yes. Now I Remember Why I Love This New Pedagogy

Evolution of an Information Junkie

Gearing Up for the Big Game

Twitter for Teachers: Hashtag PD!

Turning up the Juice

Inquiry Learning: This Isn't Scary at All

Growing Self-Directed Learners: Baby Steps

Global Learning the Primary Way

Thanks to Our Faculty Ning Community, We're Collaborating Like Never Before

5 Reasons Why Our Students Are Writing Blogs and Creating ePortfolios

Ready for the Power Surge

How We're Cultivating Inventive Thinkers in the Middle Grades

Self-Assessment in Grade One: "I Want to Be Excellent"

Teaching by Getting Out of the Way

What Do We Mean by "Authentic Learning?"

I'm a Connected Teacher, But at What Price?

Afterword: Extra Energy

Passion Based Learning in the 21st century:

An interview with Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach

Foreword

Will Richardson



Has there been a more fun time to be a learner?. As one of my favorite modern thinkers Clay Shirky says, "We're living through the greatest expansion in human expressive capability in history." We have access to more content, more information, more teachers than ever before. We can create and share knowledge in creative and important ways. Just 20 years ago, when these connective Internet technologies were still in their nascent form, little of this was possible. And 20 years from now, when ubiquitous access to the Web will be within reach of almost everyone, most of it will just be business as usual. But despite the challenges of this fast changing learning world, there can be little question that this is a most amazing moment to be a learner, and an educator.

Since our inception seven years ago, our goal at Powerful Learning Practice has been to help bring a different lens for learning to classrooms around the globe and to impact the lives of students in ways that will better prepare them for the worlds they will inherit from us. To do that, we've had the real privilege of working with thousands of teachers, teachers who have been willing to be pushed and prodded and sometimes cajoled into unlearning and relearning their craft. It's been a difficult journey for some, an easier one for others. Either way, it's been an great opportunity for us to learn together and expand our own thinking around change and literacy and a whole host of other topics.

And that's what I love so much about these collected blog posts from the Voices from the Learning Revolution blog: they capture those changes and the new opportunities we all have to learn in some concrete and useful ways.



These are educators who for whatever reason have decided to embrace the moment, not try to push it away, and instead make sense of it for their students and, importantly, for themselves.



And almost as importantly, they've decided to share their journeys with the world so we can learn with them together. In doing so, they serve as models for their students, for their colleagues and for us in the ways in which connected educators need to rethink their learning lives and professional practice.

As these blog posts articulate, the really good news is that change is happening in more and more classrooms and schools, for more and more students. These authors show us that if we have a passion to keep learning, a will to innovate, and a capacity to problem-solve and collaborate, we can make great things happen for the children who we serve. We can provide for them a different meaning for “learning,” one that is defined by more than “high student achievement” or “better student outcomes” or even “college readiness.” One that allows all of us the agency and potential to create our own education instead of having one delivered to us, and, in doing so, develop a deep love of learning in our own right. Right now, more than needing better institutions of learning, we need better learners. That's what the work of these educators is all about.

We still have many barriers; a lack of access for millions of kids; shrinking budgets for technology and professional development; the money and power of businesses and lobbyists who are out to rewrite the story of public education in this country and elsewhere. Understanding what change in education looks like envelops a host of different contexts and narratives, many of which are only now coming to light. And in the near term, those and many other barriers will continue to be very difficult to overcome.

Despite those challenges, however, we have a choice, each

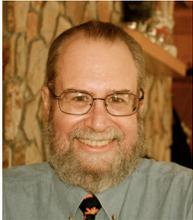
one for ourselves. We can choose to unlearn and relearn our own practice to better reflect the vast opportunities we have at this moment. We can choose to find ways to bring small but meaningful changes into our schools and classrooms when possible and appropriate. We can choose to advocate for larger conversations in our communities around what our new value is in a world filled with content and teachers. And, in our most difficult moments, we can choose to focus on what authors Chip and Dan Heath call the “bright lights” of change, those occasions when we can peek into the future and see our classrooms remade, our children learning deeply and passionately, and our colleagues joining with us.

Enjoy the “bright lights” of change that follow. We sincerely hope these stories and ideas prove valuable in your own work to make sense of this most fun and interesting time.

- Will Richardson

Editor's Note

John Croft Norton



With very few exceptions, the short essays in this inaugural collection are reproduced just as they first appeared at our group blog *Voices from the Learning Revolution*. A few titles have been tweaked, a few references updated.

If you find alternate spellings of words like “color/colour” remember that several of our authors teach in Canada and Australia where the spell-checkers have a different idea about right and wrong.

At the end of each entry, I’ve included a sample of comments offered by readers on the original posts. I’ve favored those that add a fresh idea or additional resource. Some comments are lightly edited for space and clarity. Often an author will reply to comments and expand their thinking. With luck, some back and forth conversation will ensue, every serious blogger’s delight.

A personal note: I’ve spent much of my professional career writing about and supporting the work and writing of teachers. Until fairly recently, most of that work focused on educators in public schools in the U.S. Thanks to PLP, I’ve now had the opportunity to work closely with teachers not only in public education but in independent and parochial schools here and abroad. It’s been a revelation.

When teachers in many different settings and working conditions look beyond their surface differences, they soon discover what they have in common: a restless drive to improve learning for all students. And the conversations are amazing. They’re no longer hung up on “why that won’t work here.” They’re ready to learn, adapt, share and grow together. You’ll see that going on in *Powering Up*, as you listen to this wonderful mix of authors and commenters ready to connect.

– John Croft Norton, PLP Coordinator of Content & Capacity Building

Introduction

Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach



Publication of *The Connected Teacher: Powering Up* marks and celebrates the launch of our Powerful Learning Press — an education publishing venture by Powerful Learning Practice, LLC to create vital books full of advice and encouragement for teachers and other educators ready to make the shift to connected learning.

In our recent [book](#) *The Connected Educator: Learning & Leading in the Digital Age* (Solution Tree, 2012), my co-author Lani Ritter Hall and I devote considerable space to a discussion of the shift and our definition of what it means to be an educator who is “connected.” Here’s some of what we say:

People connect through communities of learners, which today’s technological tools support in new ways. Through technology, learning is seamless. Learning can take place anywhere, any time.

Yet in most schools, still, the assumptions are that learning is an individual process, that learning has a beginning and an end, that learning happens in schools separately from the rest of life’s activities, and that learning is the result of teaching. Technology is beginning to shift those assumptions and change the way we, as educators, learn....

If you have not yet begun to thin the walls and open the doors of your classroom, school, or district, you’re most likely plagued with the same nagging feeling we started with: something is missing. Educators have accepted and perpetuated professional practice behind shut doors and in closed buildings, our day-to-day work disconnected from colleagues’ efforts. We have read, we have listened, and we have been talked at. We have done the best we could do given the resources available. So what are we missing? Meaningful collaboration and authentic collegiality....

The networked landscape of learning that is readily available to many students and adults outside of school challenges us to re-envision what we do inside our schools and classrooms—or risk a growing irrelevance in students’ lives....

Connected leaders and learners shift from seeing education as a series of things we do to students and teachers and instead as dynamic learning environments where learners take ownership of their own growth and pursue it passionately. The web and other powerful social technologies offer opportunities that we can integrate into the learning experience. But the shift is not primarily about changing the tools we use. It is about transforming the way most teachers teach today. They teach this way either because they were taught to teach in that manner or because the accountability system makes them believe they have to.

We’ve launched Powerful Learning Press to further support educators as they make the shift. PL Press will publish concise, inexpensive books showcasing the authentic voices of teachers, principals and other educators who are resolutely transforming their classroom and leadership practices to better prepare our millennial students for life in a century of unprecedented opportunity and instability. We believe readers will appreciate the thoughtful reflections and practical advice from fellow educators who understand that in the 21st century, teachers must be learners first.

Although you will hear many diverse voices in this and future PL Press books, our authors all share a common vision, which Lani and I expressed this way in *The Connected Educator*:

Change is not easy. Teaching to multiple-choice tests is easy. Turning your classroom or school into a place where deep learning occurs and learners’ needs are being met is hard. Educational change is hard because it involves re-culturing—re-examining values and dispositions and letting go of what we are vested in.

Teaching is, at its core, a moral profession. Helping students become connected, passion-driven learners is a moral issue. Most of us went into education to change the world, to help kids, to make a difference, and somewhere along the way, many of us lost sight of that moral purpose.

We all have a choice: A choice to be powerful or pitiful. A choice to allow ourselves to become victims or activists. A choice to take a stand on behalf of the children we serve.

Powerful Learning Press exists to support everyone who makes the choice to make a difference. That's our promise.

A few words about this book

The essays collected in *The Connected Teacher: Powering Up* first appeared in our PLP group blog, *Voices from the Learning Revolution*. When I introduced the blog in March 2011, I described it as the place “where multiple voices from our Powerful Learning Practice (PLP) communities tell their stories about connected and shifted learning.”

As I said then, what I love about this blog is that it isn't about us (PLP), but about the collective us (the educators and schools) who share a powerful awareness about the future of learning. The VFLR writers are not necessarily revolutionary leaders — but the work they are doing IS revolutionary.

“

These educators are leaving behind outdated practices and mindsets and shifting toward the kind of connected, digitally infused teaching and learning that we know our 21st century students need.

”

If the voices and ideas in this book resonate for you, I urge you to visit our *Voices from the Learning Revolution* [space](#) and join the conversation about shift. You'll find our writers eager to engage as you share your comments, questions and ideas.

This is not about marketing our company — it's about engaging a large audience of educators and other change agents in a significant discussion about what learning must become. For us, it's about storytelling, capacity building, and giving back. It's

about spreading what educators and schools who are part of the Powerful Learning Practice network are doing as they put all they have learned in our community and their networks into their daily professional practice.

I hope you'll enjoy this first book. These essays were selected from among more than 100 written by our VFLR bloggers, with an emphasis on pieces that might encourage and inspire educators just beginning the shift to connected, inquiry driven teaching.

While only a subset of our VFLR writers are represented here, you'll hear from all the others in future Powerful Learning Press collections. Meanwhile, please visit our blog where you can [read about](#) each of our outstanding writers and sample the growing collection of their remarkable work.

– Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach



FLIPPING THE SWITCH

The Courage to Change

Will My Third Graders Be
Educated When They Grow Up?

My First Year of Teaching Dangerously

Making the Shift: Teachers
Learning from Teachers

Becoming a Techy Teacher

Some Tips for Getting Started

The Courage to Change

Shelley Wright

I think all teachers must have times when they're faced with the decision to continue on the safe road that they know, or radically depart on a way that they believe to be better, but the specific route and outcomes are unknown. At least I've been faced with this decision. And in all honesty, sometimes I've chosen the former, and sometimes the latter. Although for the last five months, I've consistently chosen the latter, and they have been the most challenging and fulfilling five months of my career.

What is the path I've chosen? Changing to a student-centered, skill-based, technology Wembedded classroom. A mouthful, I know.

One evening, last semester, I decided to [take the plunge](#), and I haven't looked back. Instead of a teacher-centered, textbook based Biology classroom, I shifted mine to a collaborative learning network. Instead of lectures, my students researched each unit. Sometimes individually. Sometimes in groups. Often they were responsible for teaching their peers. For in-class assignments, they often had to apply their knowledge to solve problems. Additionally, we created our own on-line textbook. How did it turn out? I'll let you be the judge:



[Click to view in your browser](#)

However, it still isn't easy to change the new classes I'm teaching this semester. I continue to be faced with the same questions. Do I risk changing my teaching practices to reflect 21st C. skills and technology, or do I go with what is safe? Or in some cases, what is easier? Do I fall back on what I know "works", in the most basic sense, even though deep down I understand it's not what my students need or what engages them? Or, do I accept the challenge and move forward on a new path?

A voice inside my head whispers, "You don't need to take this chance. No one will know, if you don't." I will. And that's what matters. I know that if I don't take this path, the part of me that is courageous is somehow diminished, and next time I'm less likely to do what I know I need to do. And I believe in all honesty that I'll be failing my students.

Why do I believe in this?

My students need the kind of education that requires them to think critically, problem solve, and learn skills of collaboration, rather than memorize for an exam and forget everything the next day, or believe that there's only one answer to a problem. In our 21st century world, any problem that is significant requires complex answers, none of them necessarily "right."

Furthermore, the top 10 jobs in 2010 didn't exist in 2004. How do we prepare our students for jobs that don't exist now, that will use technology that hasn't been invented, to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet? By teaching them skills, not solely content.

Content is easy. Google it. We live in a world where content is ubiquitous. And in a wi-fi world it's accessible almost anywhere. We need to teach our students skills to be able navigate and make sense of such a world.

How am I doing this?

First, my science, technology, and English classes are paperless. This is a big change for me and my students. All the information for our class is housed on our wiki. My students are in the process of adapting to being responsible for their own education. Instead of having things handed to them, whether it be the answer, or a piece of paper with their assignment on

it, they are now required to take initiative and access all the information they need.

This semester we've also switched from a traditional Holocaust novel study Q & A, to a framework that scaffolds group discussion. Some weeks they'll meet in homogeneous groups, with those who have read the same book. Other weeks they'll meet in heterogeneous groups, with those who have read a different book from their own.

Today was their first day of novel discussions. One word for it — painful. Many of my students lack the skills necessary for an insightful conversation surrounding their book's characters and motivations. They're not familiar with the kinds of questions that don't necessarily have a right answer, let alone more than one.

And so, haltingly and awkwardly, they answered the questions that were set out for them. Few poured forth deep, poignant insights. There was no critical dialogue. Yet.

Sometimes success can look like failure

What did I do? I walked around the room and listened. And thought, "wow, there are easier ways to do this." Easier, yes. Better, no. Even though I know what the beginning of this process can be expected to look like, it still feels like today's class was a failure. But I know it's not; it's the first step in skill building.

I wonder how often, as teachers, we have classes that feel like failures, but they're really not. Instead it's a messy, awkward success, given the stage that our students are at. How often do we want the end result — engaged, articulate, deep discussions — without being willing to do the hard work to get there? Instead of seeing all the struggling as the necessary first step, we see it as a failure and don't try it again. I know I've been guilty of this.

I find in the beginning that it takes as much work for me not to jump in and rescue the conversations as it does for my students to have them. So today I walked around and listened, and told myself over and over, "This is painful, but next week it will be a little bit better. And the week after that will be a little bit better still."



Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear

— **Ambrose Redmoon**



My students are in the process of developing the skills they need. It's not quick. It's not even efficient or easy. But it is necessary for their development as creative, critical problem solvers who will live, and work, in our complex world.

//Selected Comments

Susan M.

Easier, yes. Better, no. You've captured the tension so well, Shelley. I used to struggle with the same issues in my class. Your honesty and powerful storytelling skills help me know I'm not alone with these feelings.

Ann M.

This was really an inspirational post, Shelley. I think the video says it all. This change is difficult for teachers since at times it looks like we are losing control. Instead we are empowering the students and that is what it's all about. It takes courage and hard work. Thanks.

Karen

Thank you for a great example and for paving the way to the future we need to have all teaching and learning move towards. What I really appreciate is that you still have human interaction and face to face, which is key to sparking imagination in children and youth!

Sheryl T.

The "yellow-brick" road we follow as educators is currently a road to nowhere. Congratulations to you for finding the courage to forge a new path.

Buzz G.

You nailed it on so many levels. We give lip service to the need to raise a generation of critical thinkers, yet in practice we mainly honor rote memorization. No pain – no gain. Thank you for your honest and thought provoking reflection. I'll be back for more encouragement!

Shelley Wright

Technology should never replace the face to face interactions we have with our students. It's through these times that we build rich relationships with them.

Renee H.

Your description of the process you and your students are going through, the ups and downs, the doubt and recovery from doubt, is so powerful and instructive. It takes a special type of courage to be “out there,” to be willing to risk an imperfect lesson because you know that what you are doing is worth it. And not just worth it, but necessary. The fact that your students are learning these skills at this point in their education is a sad fact you make clear. It has to start earlier. Kudos to your students. They are our teachers too.

About the Author



Shelley Wright is a teacher and education blogger in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, Canada. She teaches high school, English and science and also serves as a technology integration coach. Her passion in education is social justice, global education and helping her students make the world a better place. She blogs at [Wright's Room](#). Follow her on Twitter at @wrightsroom.

Will My 3rd Graders Be Educated When They Grow Up?

Patti Grayson

I have the joy of spending every day with an energetic, fun, curious group of 20 third graders. They ask great questions and are truly excited about learning. In fact, sometimes it feels like they are 9 going on 29. They seem to enjoy playing “Stump the Teacher,” and I’m ok with that! They understand that many days I’m going to be learning new things right along with them.

Every now and then, I try to imagine what the world will be like when these little guys graduate from college in 2025. When I look at the advances we’ve made in the last dozen years, it’s hard to fathom where we’ll be in another dozen.

The realization that we have absolutely no idea what kind of world these children will find as they enter adulthood means we can only guess at what knowledge and skills will be important. And yet I have a role in preparing them for this world of tomorrow. This version of “Stump the Teacher” is not fun at all....

What does it mean to be “educated” in the 21st century?

When I was growing up and struggling through pre-calculus, I asked the question all students ask – “Why do I have to know this? When will I ever use it?” One of my parents’ favorite replies was that it would help make me a “well-rounded individual.” This, of course, was very important for receptions and cocktail parties; I must be prepared to look and sound articulate. Educated. Well, I’ve never really found a need to discuss pre-calculus at a dinner party, and I’ve never used it in my career. But in principle I do understand the value of being educated.

Here’s the dilemma: With the world changing so rapidly, being educated takes on new meaning. First of all, I think even the word “educated” is outdated. It conveys the message that if you

complete a certain number of steps or reach a certain level in the system of diplomas and degrees, you can relax and make a living from what you know. Not so today — the demand to master new knowledge and skills is neverending. If you want to be successful, you never finish your education. So my mission (and I choose to accept it) is not to educate students, but to cultivate learners.

I don't need to spend precious classroom hours cramming disconnected facts into kids who will then memorize them, regurgitate them, and promptly forget them before the year is through. I need to build on kids' innate curiosity and excitement for new knowledge. But I'm realistic. I know I'm not going to get kids hungry for deeper understanding with topics that have no interest or relevance for them.

I can help pique interest by presenting the material in a creative way. I can create challenging and intriguing problems that require basic math and literacy skills to solve, and show kids why knowing certain material or possessing certain skills is valuable. But that's not enough. I've got to give students time to pursue learning in the areas that interest them NOW.

**The era of
“well-roundedness”
is quickly passing**

Is the connected world too vast and full of information to develop “well-rounded” individuals anymore? I suspect it is. The availability of knowledge is unlimited. What combination of this knowledge would now form “well-roundedness?”

If we concentrate on fostering curiosity and exploration in the early grades, and guide students to find joy in learning and discovery through their passions and interests, then as those interests change (and the world changes), they will possess the tools and insight to continue to seek learning opportunities. If my 3rd graders graduate as passionate learners and innovative problem solvers, they will be an asset in the future – no matter what that future may bring.

As adults we make our own decisions about what to learn on an ongoing basis. We have only so much time, money, and energy. We assess each learning opportunity and ask ourselves: Is this something I really want to know? If we want to lead students to define their passions at an earlier age, at what point do we allow

them to start making these learning choices? With my guidance I know my 3rd graders are ready to benefit from options about the information they want to pursue.

Many folks think the education reform movement is largely about curriculum or technology, but it's much bigger than that. With the above questions in mind, it becomes clear that the framework of education must change so that we are much more intentional about creating "lifelong learners" who leverage the technologies with passion and purpose.

If I've done my job and helped prepare my third graders for the future, they won't remember that I taught them long division (even though I did). They'll remember me as the teacher who opened the world to them — who encouraged them to seek learning with tremendous enthusiasm and to relish the deeper understanding they gain as a result.

//Selected Comments

Geralyn S.

Patti, you begin a great conversation with your observation that a teacher's job is not to educate students but cultivate learners.

Much of my experience working with teachers is that they have forgotten how important constant learning is for their profession and their personal growth. I love the idea that the shift in education is not about technology but about learning.

My question to you is how do you get the teacher who has been using the same purple ditto for the last 10 years to understand that their students do indeed learn differently?

Patti Grayson

You raise a good question. It is awfully hard to get some teachers to acknowledge that those purple dittos and faded overhead transparencies **MUST GO**. We may have to take baby steps, but teachers as well as students must be held accountable. We required our faculty to take some baby steps this year, and made sure we had a team of folks ready to support and encourage them.

The students can lead the way if we will let them. Mine are excited to try new things, even if they know I am learning right along with them. If you have a teacher that is bringing innovation to the classroom, can you have your resistant teacher observe them and see the difference in the classroom atmosphere? It's contagious!

Geralyn S.

Good point, Patti. The openness lies in a teacher being able to learn from a student, thus modeling lifelong learning. This is so essential for educators today. But I am preaching to the choir.

So the “push” comes from leadership? The “requiredness” of learning something new. Hmm. I understand the essential part of that, but if educators are lifelong learners? That needs to be our ultimate goal.

Virginia Y.

You asked about 21st century learning skills. My daughter's school is part of the New Technology Consortium and they identify these skills as: communication, collaboration, critical thinking and innovation, citizenship, information literacy, technological literacy, and self direction.

I think the hardest skill to develop for high schoolers coming from the current system (especially with the focus on testing) is self direction. Since the school is all project based, students need to learn how to plan out their work and follow through, get assignments in on time, look for information outside of what they have been given, and so forth. I agree with Geralyn. I love your description of moving from “education” to “cultivators of learners.”

Tricia S.

I also teach third grade students and grappled with the same question of how to best attempt to prepare them for a future that we can not even begin to imagine. I agree that students not only need to learn to use technology but need to develop a spirit of inquiry and problem solving. Focusing only on implementing the use of technology is not effective because the current “new” technology will be so outdated by the time our students need to enter the work force.

In reading some of the other comments I would agree that a new model of professional development needs to occur if we are to help our students to learn to become life-long learners. They should be able to look at us for inspiration. Forced professional development and faculty meetings will not achieve this goal. I feel that by seeking out other professionals [via the Internet] will be beneficial to me in my quest to find answers to the questions I face daily as an educator.

About the Author



Patti Grayson is an elementary teacher at Virginia's Hampton Roads Academy and a member of the school's digital learning leadership team. This year she's teaching fourth grade, which she likes very much. She blogs at [Patti's Ponderings](#). Follow her on Twitter @pattigrayson.

My First Year of Teaching Dangerously

Becky Bair

When I first started teaching, I was handed a curriculum and told, “here’s what you need to teach.” How I taught it, the ways in which I integrated the different subjects, and the different modalities I used to hook my students were up to me.

With the background knowledge from my college courses and the support of my talented mentor and other colleagues, I planned and delivered lessons to meet the needs of my students and the requirements of the curriculum. Sometimes they worked, and I kept those to use again the following year. Other times, the lessons did not turn out as planned so I looked for ways to reteach my current kids and improve in years to come. Teaching was fun, and by getting to know my students I was able to plan lessons and activities that would get them excited about learning and encourage them to go out and learn more on their own.

In August I will be starting my fourteenth year of public schoolteaching, but the last few years have been no fun. There is very little creativity in teaching any more. We hear words like “rigorous” and “research-based,” not “student selected” or “engaging.”

Teacher designed lessons crafted specifically for our unique mix of students have been discarded in favor of scripted lessons that are one size fits all. The days of learning from and sharing with professional colleagues have been replaced by time spent pouring over screen after screen of test score data. Our kids are beginning to hate school and, to be quite honest, so are the teachers.

Going against the tide is scary

With all the consequences that ride on a small number of standardized assessments, trying to do something different, like blending technology into your lesson plans, can be extremely scary. Will my students learn what they need to in order to pass

“the test”? How will other teachers react? What will parents say? Will I have support from my administration?

This past year, I knew in my heart that things needed to be different in my upper elementary classroom. The last thing I wanted was to do the wrong thing for my kids by trying something new. But it was time to change, no matter how scary the prospect might be.

I’ve always incorporated technology into my lessons, but this year I was able to take the next step through a Powerful Learning Practice professional development opportunity offered by our area education service agency. Rather than teaching to the test in reading, which is what I felt I’d been doing the last few years, I focused on skills and strategies and had my students responding on a class wiki. Many times we shared links to websites that connected to what we were reading, or we used the discussion page to talk about what we were reading and to add our own questions about the stories. As I expected, students chose to participate much more often than they did during worksheet-based class discussions.

Other times, like when we were working on compare and contrast and evaluating, I asked my students to compare two items — a Wii and an iPad — and recommend one for the classroom. I was able to use their evaluations to help write a grant proposal to try to get iPads for our classroom. While the grant was not successful, the students saw that their work had a purpose; there was more to learning than just answering questions on a test.

After I shifted my teaching strategies, it was terrifying each time I had to review our required reading assessments. I could see the kids demonstrating their knowledge on our wiki, but would they be able to transfer what they were learning to the weekly test? Just like my first years of teaching, some lessons worked and the students did well on their assessments. I tucked those activities away for the future. When the scores showed my students didn’t quite get it, I knew I needed to adjust how I taught that skill or strategy to help my kids grasp the concepts better.

We took to the blog

In writing, we took to the blog, and my students finally had a purpose for writing. While there were times when everybody was working on the same topic, what really sparked their writing was the opportunity for the kids to share unique pieces with the world: stories, events and topics that mattered to them. I know that “Nine Innings” by Hunter, or “Ninja Cat” by Grace would most likely not have been written if it wasn’t for the blog, nor would Nathan have had the chance for people to read “The Strange House of Professor Travis McGee,” which began:

“*In the Swiss Alps there lived a man, an unusual man. He was a scientist, he did many strange experiments. Some people thought he was mad. He had white hair, it wasn’t grey hair. Not the hair that you get when you’re old. It was a bright snow white. Some people think he was struck by lightning in a experiment and it turned from brown to white. This man lived alone in a house larger than the White House. Neighbors have no idea where he’s from or how he built the house but one thing is for sure, it is the scariest house they have seen with gargoyles on the roof that seem to peer into your soul, and a giant Hollywood style graveyard on the side.*”

The kids jumped up and cheered the day we got our first outside comments on our blogs — and I jumped up and cheered when I had the data to show that my kids’ writing had improved dramatically over the course of each marking period.

Did my students learn what they needed to pass “the tests” required by our state? I’m still waiting on pins and needles to learn the answer to that question — the data is still out. But here’s what I can tell you based on our local scores and student interviews: More kids showed improvement in their reading and writing than in past years, and they enjoyed the learning experience. On their year-end reflections, students shared thoughts like these: “I never believed I could read books and actually like it” and “I never thought I would like writing so much!” and “Knowing that anybody in the world could read my writing made me try a lot harder.” That tells me the changes implemented in my classroom worked for this group of kids.

**New building,
new grade,
new year**

I know I was lucky this year. I had students who were enthusiastic and jumped at the chance to try blogs and wikis and other new technologies. Their parents were appreciative of fewer worksheets and supported the work the students were doing online. Several parents even commented multiple times on our blog. I had no complaints or concerns about the students' blogs being open for all to see.

Most importantly, I had administrators who supported me as I made this change. They gave me the green light to try something new and really encouraged me to take risks. They realized that I might need to make adjustments along the way and supported me every step.

So what happens when the new school year starts in September? I'm not sure. There are a lot of changes in store for my teaching life this year. I'll be at a new building with new administrators, teaching only two subjects at a new grade level with a new mix of students.

I'm hopeful. I have what worked and what did not work in my pocket, and I also have some ideas of how I want to take my technology use to the next level. I can't wait to improve what I did last year and make connections online with other classes to try some new things.

Will my new students learn what they need to in order to pass "the test"? How will other teachers react? What will parents say? Will I have support from my administration? I guess we'll just have to wait and see. But I'm ready to take the risk.

//Selected Comments

Tim

This is amazing. We need more teachers like you out there. We need risk takers. More and more people are concerned with meeting the status quo and hanging on to their jobs rather than really connecting to students and building them up to be strong people with skills and the curiosity to go beyond what's on the paper. Kudos and keep up the good work.

Cathy B.

Becky, I can SO relate! It is so heart-warming to read your story and hear about someone else facing the same risks — and having so much success. Perhaps we don't face quite the same level of rigor in our standardized testing system up here in Canada, but the same fear of how my kids would perform according to curriculum expectations when I try something new has made me lose sleep.

This year, as the first day of school approaches, I feel so much more prepared after a summer of focused online learning and local workshops. However it still comes down to this one gut-wrenching question: will my attempts to integrate 21st Century tools this year be successful in creating more exciting, engaging, and ultimately, more effective learning for my students?

Becky Bair

It's all about doing things differently, Cathy, and remembering that we don't have to be perfect with every single lesson we do. Each one is an opportunity for learning and an opportunity to teach our kids to be risk-takers by modeling it ourselves. I'm not sure when the gut-wrenching feeling goes away, but it is worth it in the end!

About the Author



Becky Bair teaches the intermediate grades in Pennsylvania's Elizabethtown Area School District and is passionate about incorporating technology as one of many tools to help students view learning as an exciting, lifelong endeavor. She writes the blog [Teach 'N' Life](#) and can be followed on Twitter @becky7274.

Making the Shift: Teachers Learning from Teachers

Renee Hawkins

My school recently celebrated its Centennial. The 2010 school year was a commemoration of 100 years of growth and dedication to developing the minds and spirit of young women. Among other events that took place was the customary filling of the Time Capsule, of which yours truly was placed in charge. I sent out notices requesting contributions with a reminder that the Time Capsule would not be opened until 2035! I requested “artifacts” that represented our school, our city, our country, or our world as we experienced it in 2010.

Among the many artifacts I received for the Time Capsule were several iPods, signed uniform kilts and jumpers, and favorite books and year-end magazines. The one item that gave me pause, however, was the stapled packet of fill-in-the-blank worksheets.

Of all the items I placed in Ziplock bags, I couldn't stop thinking about the worksheets and wondering what the reaction would be when they were pulled from the time capsule 25 years from now. Would our alumnae remark, “Gosh! This looks exactly like what my daughter is using!” or, “Remember when we used *these?*”

It's true that we need to implement big changes and these changes are unsettling. To complicate matters, teaching is such a solitary profession. We go into our rooms and come out for coffee and lunch. We chat in the faculty room, mainly about students or our lives, but seldom about our practice. I struggled to understand it and to find ways overcome our isolation.

And like most big problems in need of a solution, it came to me by complete accident.

The power of professional sharing

I work at a [Moodle](#) school. Moodle is our Learning Management System and we needed it to do four things: we wanted to use it to document our curriculum in a transparent way for all members of our community to access; we wanted to use Moodle to create blended learning options as a way to alleviate some scheduling conflicts; we wanted a platform for continuity of learning should we need it; and finally, we wanted to give our students 24/7 access to resources and content.

The only way to accomplish these things was for every teacher, from the 3-Day Three's program for tykes all the way to Twelfth Grade, to attend a workshop. And not just any workshop. No. This would be the mother of all workshops: three days packed with 15 hours of learning opportunities!

We offered the workshop in June and again in August to ensure as many faculty as possible could participate. It was an amalgam of “keynotes” on blended learning, assessments, and curriculum documentation; workshops on Moodle for beginners and advanced users; and hands-on learning with [Twitter](#), [backchanneling](#), podcasting, [VoiceThread](#), creating and embedding videos, screencasting, [Diigo](#) social bookmarking, wikis, blogging, and creating quizzes with [HotPotato](#). Moodle, we said, was our “portal to learning.” We would use Moodle to direct our students to resources and activities outside of our classroom.

And do you know who taught these workshops? We did. We taught ourselves. Our First Grade teacher and Eleventh Grade English teacher led a session on blogging and writing; a math and history teacher led the advanced Moodle workshop. Teachers from our Lower, Middle and Upper schools worked to create discipline-specific Essential Questions and discussed opportunities for new forms of assessment.

What I learned during those three days is this: I am surrounded by experts. Need help with backchanneling? Go see the Latin teacher. Want to embed video? Call the Middle School History teacher. If you want to design the prettiest, most content rich blog your students have ever seen, make an appointment to see the First Grade teacher. We learned that we all have something to share, and we welcomed opportunities to learn from one

another. This was the happy accident. We like learning, and we like learning from one another.

**We journeyed together
from how to why**

Once we started learning how to use the tools, we began to discuss why we should use them.

When the chair of the History Department started blogging with her students, she wanted them to not only write well, but also to connect with experts, and she shared this outcome with members of her department.

When our Fifth Grade teacher chose to use VoiceThread, she did so because she believed it would be more engaging and the feedback more meaningful than the traditional “stand and deliver” method. She was right. She told students to respond to 3 classmates in the VoiceThread project, but every student responded to every one of her classmates. Once she explained why she thought it worked better than the “old way,” other teachers were willing to try it themselves.

I am a believer in the power of professional sharing. I’ve experienced it first-hand. It is both empowering and satisfying to teach a skill, share a best practice, and learn something from someone with whom you thought you had nothing in common. And I always circle back to this question: If it works so well for us, and makes us feel so good, imagine what it would mean for our students. Shouldn’t our students have opportunities to teach and learn from one another – to develop and share their expertise?

I’m less concerned about those worksheets now. They are fast becoming just what I called them: artifacts. They’ll stay hidden away for 25 years, and when the time capsule is opened and the ziplock bag removed, those alumnae will roll their eyes and laugh. “Remember when we had to use these?”

Remember when, indeed.

//Selected Comments

Chris S.

Renee, you always make me think: “If it works so well for us, and makes us feel so good, imagine what it will mean for our students.” This gets right to the heart of it for me. Our community is full of teachers and learners, and we, at various times, wear both hats. And I like wearing both hats. It’s what makes the whole process of learning so exciting for me. The key is to give these experiences to our students. We need to let them feel the joy of sharing their knowledge and, at times, being the experts.

Ann M.

I love how you used the 3-day program of teacher development as an opportunity for teachers to learn from each other. What an opportunity to realize that when working in schools we are all surrounded by experts! All the hands-on learning areas you mention are worth focusing on, and in most schools there are teachers who can take on the role as facilitators.

Susan M.

What a great line, Renee: “We like learning, and we like learning from one another.” A work environment like that makes it easy to get up every day.

About the Author



Renee Hawkins is a 4th/5th grade teacher and Director of Instructional Technology at Garrison Forest School, a nursery-to-grade 12 girls’ school near Baltimore, Maryland, and co-author (with Texas educator Susan Lucille Davis) of the blog [The Flying Trapeze](#). A teacher for 28 years, she has taught in the U.S. and Japan. Follow Renee on Twitter @rhawk.

Becoming a Techy Teacher

Patti Grayson

Last summer I completed two online graduate courses at The University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, part of their [Teaching 2.0 program](#) entitled: Emerging Technology Meets Progressive Pedagogy. This program looks at the way education is changing, the way students learn, and the way technology can be used to help students collect information, collaborate with other students, and connect to a network that can further their learning.

One of the UWOSH courses I took this term, “Learning in a Connected World,” was particularly practical. Although I had begun to develop a personal learning network (PLN) before starting the course, this gave me the opportunity to look further into useful tools, ways to engage my students, and applications of these resources in my classroom. It came at a good time -- right in the wake of some major aha! moments for me.

At some point this past school year, I began to truly understand how to change my teaching. The big revelation: It's NOT about technology. It's about learning. If we are “integrating technology” just to bring computers (or interactive whiteboards, or cell phones) into the classroom, we've got it all wrong. Just using the equipment — or the web tools it allows us to access — isn't going to lead us or our students to truly connected learning.

Here are four of my biggest ahas:

- We have to look at our overarching goals, and understand how technology is a necessary tool in helping students develop the skills they will need to be successful in the world they will enter.
- We have to look at how students like to learn on their own, so we can make learning more enjoyable and engaging in the classroom.

- We have to learn what presentation methods or styles of instruction are easy for students to retain, so we can present information in a way that students will hang onto.
- We have to look at what students will be expected to know and do in the coming years, so we can prepare them for their future — not ours.

Once we have done this, technology ceases to become a goal and becomes instead a means to a goal — something we use fluidly and regularly, and most of all, with purpose. Apps and digital appliances cease to be toys. Instead, they are specialized tools we select for the learning job at hand.

Wondering how to get there?

Here's some teacher to teacher advice, based on my experiences:

1. Learn – Part A. Take classes. Read posts or books by leaders in the field, or by educators who are having positive experiences in their classrooms. Do professional development workshops or conferences. Being in a [Powerful Learning Practice](#) community was transformative for me. PLP has e-courses too.

2. Learn – Part B. Develop a personal learning network of individuals across the globe who have “been there done that” or want to learn with you. Use Twitter and [Twitter hashtags](#), [blogs](#), or [social networking](#) to find educators posting ideas and resources.

3. Collaborate. Find a buddy to learn with, or a mentor to guide you. There are no stupid questions. Support and encourage each other. If you can't locate one close by, look for compatible colleagues in online communities, including places like [Skype in the Classroom](#), where the audio, video and texting tools can promote sharing.

4. Dive in. Start playing – exploring – trying. You won't break anything. Find out what is out there, and discover tools that will work with your students. Here's [one good website](#) to get you started .

5. Reflect. Start a blog where you can talk about your experiences. Don't worry about an audience. In the beginning, a blog's best purpose is to help you realize what you believe and what is important to you. [Here's mine.](#)

6. Be transparent. As you begin to develop ideas and lessons, share them with your PLN. Give back to those who helped you grow, and to those who are just starting and will benefit from your experience.

7. Be patient. Change is never easy, but do you want to be that teacher who just "doesn't get it?" You will be less confident for a while as you cover yourself with "the new," and that's ok. Things are always changing, which means you will always be learning and growing. Much like your students!

About the Author



Patti Grayson is an elementary teacher at Virginia's Hampton Roads Academy and a member of the school's digital learning leadership team. This year she's teaching fourth grade, which she likes very much. She blogs at [Patti's Ponderings](#). Follow her on Twitter @pattigrayson.

Some Tips for Getting Started

Ann Michaelsen

When I read blogs or attend educational conferences these days, one issue that always pops up is the importance of getting our students connected – how learning should take place not only in the classroom but in the world through the internet.

This is often highlighted by examples on how young people learn today by chatting with friends or watching instructional YouTube videos. The possibilities seem endless, from learning how to 360 on a snowboard, to playing the piano, to solving differential equations. I have no difficulty getting how motivated teenagers would prefer this way of learning. It's accessible, instant and personalized. What strikes me is how challenging it is for a teacher to apply this mode of learning in the classroom.

It may seem easy but it is not! My experience is that there are many obstacles. Still, we want our students to be connected. How then do we help teachers connect?

I am writing this from a Norwegian perspective although I suspect it is the same everywhere. If you truly want to take advantage of the web and connect with educators, you have to invest some time in participating online. Time is the first obstacle and strongest argument teachers in Norway have against participating. While I agree that connecting and participating online is time-consuming, I know you will get so much back in return. I urge you not to give up before you have even tried.

Connecting with educators online

To make it easier to get started, I'll narrow the arenas where you might participate down to three: Twitter, blogging and Skype.

Twitter – Reading Howard Rheingold on [Twitter literacy](#), I have to agree with him. “The difference between seeing Twitter as a waste of time or as a powerful new community amplifier

depends entirely on how you look at it – on knowing how to look at it." You can't check in once a week, you need to hang out for minutes and hours to get a feel for it. You need some advice on how to connect, follow and be followed. Once you get the hang of it you will discover that there are a lot of interesting conversations going on out there by people who share the same interests as you. Use hashtags to expand your connections (and if you don't know how, [read this](#)).

One great way to exploit Twitter's instant communication capabilities is to use hashtags to connect with others and hear what they are talking about as they attend a conference (even if you are not able to attend in person). Apply the #hashtag for that conference ((like #educon, #bett, #ISTE) in your Twitter reader ([here's one](#)). Other useful hashtags for educators are #teacher or #edchat. To expand the list of endless possibilities, watch when doctor Baily from "Grey's Anatomy" introduces twitter as a [learning tool for surgeons](#). How did I find that clip? On Twitter of course!

Blogging – Blogging is one of my most successful classroom initiatives. Before introducing new technology in class you should feel confident about your own ability to use it. Before asking your students to write blogs, create one yourself. See here for [advice on how to start](#). Since launching my blog [Teaching English Using Web 2.0](#) in March 2008, I have connected with many educators and received a lot of feedback and helpful suggestions! The [EduBlogs service](#) is trusted by many teachers who have classroom blogging projects.

When students write I try to stress the importance of voicing their own opinions, and I never cease to be amazed by their research and the material they come up with. I've gone far beyond teaching by the textbook and listening to them repeat back the "right" answers. Now I find that I really learn from my students' insights every day. I list my students' blogs on my webpage and spend some time getting other students, teachers and even presenters to comment on their posts. I do this by asking my twitter network and others I connect with to contribute. It makes the student writing so much more interesting for them and truly shows you are able to connect if you try! Here is [one example](#) from my English classes.

Skype – I saved the best for last. Skype is by far the best way to connect your students to the outside world. And I do mean “The World.” As an incentive to get started, I’m happy to share the new initiative from Skype called [Skype in the Classroom](#), which carries this exciting slogan: “Meet new people, discover new cultures and connect with classes from around the world, all without leaving the classroom.” I have already found new connections in the few months I have tried this. It’s a great place to connect with teachers and classrooms in far-away places.

Here’s how:

- Establish an account if you don’t have one (it’s free).
- Then log in with your ordinary Skype username and password and post the information you would like others to read about you and your learning projects.
- You can also browse the information others have posted and send a request if you find someone you would like to connect with.
- Once you have found an interesting teacher, add them as a contact on Skype. They will then get a request from you and can decide if they are willing to accept you as a Skype friend.

For me, Skype used to be a place to connect with my daughter when she was studying abroad. Now it is a way to connect with teachers in different countries around the world. Don’t give up even if it takes time and effort. (You can find helpful how-to articles on the web. [Here’s one](#). And here’s a story about [other teachers using Skype](#).)

I have Skyped with students in Kansas and in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. One fun Skype meeting was between a class from Iowa and three students sitting in my office. The teacher found my name on a blog post and contacted me with questions her class had about Norway and the Viking “revolution.” She asked if we could be of assistance to her 5th grade social studies classes – they would love any opportunity to interact with students in Norway and gain knowledge about the Viking era and our country. We ended up having a lot of fun interacting with the 5th graders on Skype, and my students enjoyed the

opportunity to act as teachers on the subject. Age difference can sometimes be an advantage.

Another Skype project that I would like to share is connecting with the city of Dhaka in Bangladesh. In discussing megacities in our curriculum, we learned that Dhaka is the fastest growing megacity in the world. Naturally we were curious about how it is to grow up and be a teenager there. We were able to make contacts with Dhaka teens using Skype in the Classroom. And even when we're not able to Skype, we can connect via mail and by writing on our blogs. This is a good example of a real life experience via the web, and we are learning things the textbook alone could never teach us.

Becoming a connected teacher who can, in turn, connect your students takes some time and work. But I think you can see from my own story (and by following some of the links here in my post) that the opportunities to enrich your teaching and your students' learning are endless.

//Selected Comments

John N.

Ann, the time obstacle is certainly the same in the USA. Thanks for sharing some ideas with teachers who might be ready to jump in the fjord with you. And for not sugar-coating the amount of effort it takes to do the right thing for today's students.

Nancy C.

Love your post! Wish this was around a while ago. While I have done all the things you suggest – it was a process. It takes time and a little effort to become connected but the benefits are certainly worth it (as usually is the case when you extend yourself, don't you think?). Through Twitter, Blogging and Skyping I have grown as a teacher (even after 20 years in the business). My students are the ones that truly reap those benefits. I have tried to explain to my colleagues about the power of Twitter, Blogging and Skyping but they remain reluctant. I will be passing your post along to them!

Lyn H.

Ann, I appreciate that you've detailed the use of engaging in each tool/practice and the benefits of each. Wearing my principal hat, I will be sharing this post with my staff members. I believe many are eager to get started with this process but are simply overwhelmed with the amount of information and tools "out there." What advice do you have for teachers who are struggling with managing the initial time commitment of becoming a connected learner?

Ann Michaelsen

Lyn, I remember when I started using Twitter three years ago and how difficult I thought it was going to be. Now I know that it doesn't really matter how many people you follow or how many are following you. The important part is to find conversations that are engaging and people who share useful links and add insight to areas that interest you.

With blogging: I would suggest teachers start by writing blogs where they share lesson plans and teaching material. And then have students writing blogs too. I usually assign a blog post each week based on material we have covered in class. I always read and comment on the posts they write and encourage them to comment on each other's posts too. I know my students really like writing on their blogs, and it is a great way to get to know your students better.

About the Author



Ann S. Michaelsen is a teacher and administrator at Sandvika High School in Oslo, Norway. She presented at the global Microsoft Partners in Learning Innovative Education Forums in 2010, a year after Sandvika was named Norway's 2009 Pathfinder school. She offers advice and insights to fellow educators at the blog [Teaching English Using Web 2.0](#) and on Twitter at @annmic.

FEELING THE CURRENT

Igniting the Heart of Learning in the Collaborative Age

Confessions of a Closet Constructivist

Ah, Yes. Now I Remember Why I Love This New Pedagogy

Evolution of an Information Junkie

Gearing Up for the Big Game

Twitter for Teachers: Hashtag PD!

Igniting the Heart of Learning in the Collaborative Age

Sister Geralyn Schmidt

As the last bell of the 2011 school year rang throughout our area, I was transported back several years to a conversation I had with a fifth grader who was bemoaning that summer vacation had just begun. Yes, he was sad to see school end. His consternation was over the fact that during summer vacation, he had little opportunity to socialize with his classmates and his learning was limited to what HE was interested in perusing and not as collaborative as the learning at school. He went on to explain how he enjoyed learning when he could follow personal interests as well as learn about history, math and other “school stuff.”

This remembrance immediately called to mind animation industry leader Randy Nelson’s 2008 presentation about [Learning and Working in the Collaborative Age](#). According to Nelson (who has been a top executive at both Pixar and DreamWorks Animation), members of a team who collaborate make the other members look good. This energy allows the team to be more creative than a team that works only “cooperatively” on a project.

A cooperative team, he said, works along parallel lines, conferring occasionally, as they develop project pieces. A collaborative team is set up so that the members constantly interact, bouncing ideas off of one another and creating synergy that produces something never seen before, rather than a layering of individual ideas. The collaborative approach requires the team to work together heart and soul to reach the ultimate objective.

Isn’t it heart and soul that we educators hope to ignite in every student? We do that by teaching in ways that spark a creative quest for learning. [John Bosco](#), a 19th century educator, [said](#):

“Remember that education is a matter of the heart.” In other words, education should make the heart thirst for what is truly good. In 1965, Pope Paul IV wrote in *Gravissimum Educationis*:

“

Education... between pupils of different talents and backgrounds promotes friendly relations and fosters a spirit of mutual understanding; and it establishes as it were a center whose work and progress must be shared together by families, teachers, associations of various types that foster cultural, civic, and religious life, as well as by civil society and the entire human community.

”

The thirst for what is good unites all of humanity into a community that is joined at the heart. The more we encourage and nurture collaboration, the more we satisfy that thirst.

The internet, social networking software and web 2.0 tools have paved a way to connect with one another unlike any other communication system in human history. Connectivity allows students to learn not only from experts in the field but from other students as well. No longer is one restricted to what can be accomplished in close physical proximity.

But providing students with connectivity, alone, is not enough. To quote a comic book superhero, “with great power comes great responsibility.” We have a duty, as educators, to instruct our students to a higher good, not just the good for me. With our guidance, they can become participants in myriad collaborative communities that can affect change for the betterment of society.

So how do educators ignite that spark or hunger for good within their students? St. John Bosco counsels his educators, “Love what the youth loves and they will love what you love.” In other words, really KNOW who your students are and enter into their world. Don’t become their peer; just give them a chance to talk to you about their lives. Allow them to share their enthusiasm with you and (most of all) incorporate their excitement into the way you teach your content and the ways they pursue learning in your classrooms and schools.

Their eager interests should become guideposts for them to explore new venues and make learning relevant to today's world — to THEIR world. They need to experience your trust in them as they learn to trust in you. Remember, you can be the pathfinder who shows them the many ways to experience the world as community!

//Selected Comments

Monika H.

With all the buzz about Common Core standards, what a great way to check how things are going. Look for evidence of a hunger and thirst for learning.

Margaret H.

I really liked your distinction between learning cooperatively and learning collaboratively. This year I experienced both as I observed colleagues constructing new approaches to learning and assessment by developing projects within various disciplines. Thanks for the reminder about what underlies what we are attempting.

Marilyn

Thanks for exploring the idea of learning together. Although I never feel I have reached the perfect mix, cooperative learning and collaborative learning as defined by your thoughts, have always been an intricate aspect of my practice. And I continue to strive to provide opportunity for the learners to own the learning, exploring and passion.

About the Author



Sister Geralyn Schmidt, SCC is the Wide Area Network Coordinator for the Diocese of Harrisburg (PA). She has been a high school tech coordinator and graphics design teacher and also taught middle grades math and science in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York City.

Confessions of a Closet Constructivist

Shelley Wright

My first confession is that I didn't know I was a constructivist. Once I realized this, it's become easier to make intentional decisions about my classroom.

So what is a constructivist? Adherents of constructivism essentially believe that children learn by being actively engaged in and reflecting on their experiences: children learn through social interaction with others, they have different ways and modes of learning, and they develop higher-order thinking through guidance at critical points in the learning process. Of course, this is a simplified view of it; entire books have been written on constructivist classrooms. But for my purpose, what's most important is the view that learning is an active, participatory venture.

So what does this have to do with my classroom? Well, it forms the theoretical foundation for all that I do. There's much talk today about the condition of education. Many are concerned but not always for the right reasons. Test scores often don't tell us much about the state of our children's education because commonly they aren't measuring the right things. Brooks & Brooks (1993) lamented:

Many students struggle to understand concepts in isolation, to learn parts without seeing wholes, to make connections where they see only disparity, and to accept as reality what their perceptions question. For a good many students, success in school has very little to do with true understanding, and much to do with coverage of the curriculum. In many schools, the curriculum is held as absolute, and teachers are reticent to tamper with it even when students are clearly not understanding important concepts. Rather than adapting curriculum to students' needs, the predominant institutional response is to view those who have difficulty understanding the unaltered curriculum as slow or disabled.

Although this was written 20 years ago, it could have been written today. If educational reform is to be successful it must start with how students learn and how teachers teach, not with legislated outcomes.

So what are the issues?

Too often the North American classroom is dominated by teacher talk. It is the teacher's responsibility to disseminate knowledge and the students' job to memorize it. In this atmosphere it is not common for students to initiate comments or questions, and even more rare are student to student interactions, where our students can learn from and hear each other. The physical structure of most of our current classes discourages cooperation and collaboration. For many hours of the day, our students are expected to sit and learn by themselves.

**Next year my classroom
will be different**

I have to confess that all of the years I've taught, my high school classroom has been teacher-centered. Students facing the front. Me talking. Next year my classroom will be different. We've replaced all of the small rectangular tables with four larger round tables that will facilitate student conversation. My students will be looking at each other, not just me. And we will actually have room to work on projects.

The second issue is that most teachers rely on textbooks. Whatever the textbook says is the only viewpoint that is taught, and yet so many of these books leave out the voices of those who have been oppressed. Consequently alternative opinions are rarely considered.

Up until this year, I've used textbooks for science and English. And while I will still use literary texts in my English classes, I don't think we'll even take the science texts off the shelf. Last year, in my Biology class, we constructed our own text on a wiki. It was interactive and included students notes and pictures. I love this because we can tailor our text to specifically meet the needs of my students, and my students can contribute to it. It contains my voice and theirs, not just what a publisher deems important.

Getting students doing the hard work

Student thinking is devalued in most classrooms. Very rarely are students encouraged and enabled to think through intricate issues. There is often a right answer and our students are expected to find it.

I confess that I am guilty of this as well, especially in science. Too often I've had my students engaged in staid inquiry following a recipe lab with a predetermined outcome that is "correct." While I think science tries to replicate previous findings for the purpose of proving a body of knowledge, too often my students are not asked to contribute their own thinking and findings to this knowledge base.

I've realized that, ultimately, my students have a much higher stake in their education than I do. For some of them, it will be the only organized education experience they'll take part in. It's a shame when it's spent memorizing and regurgitating disconnected facts that are of no use to their "real lives," when instead they could be engaged in developing skills such as problem-solving, collaboration, critical thinking, information literacy, and other 21st century assets.

I think we're right in believing that the current education system requires an overhaul, but not in the direction it's currently headed, from all I'm able to observe. Testing students more isn't going to help. Unless we begin to honour our students as emerging thinkers, and value their current interests and present conceptions, little is going to change.

You can read about some of the early steps in my constructivist journey [here](#) and [here](#). Read my most recent posts [here](#).

//Selected Comments

Renee H.

Shelley, I love your blog posts and share many of them with my faculty. This one especially will be important as my school begins to personalize and differentiate our curriculum this coming year. The most precious and lasting skill we teachers can give our students is to teach them how to learn. They need to be "life-long learners," capable of finding what they need, evaluating it for quality, and managing their own progress.

Shelley is preparing her students for life, and more importantly, her students enjoy learning. Developing a wiki and hands-on learning projects is harder than using a textbook or taking notes during a lecture. Despite what many believe, when students are motivated to learn, you can cover all the necessary content and at a much deeper level. Access to information isn't the problem in today's networked world; learning what to do with all that information is. I've been reading Shelley's blog and following her progress as she carefully and thoughtfully navigates "the shift" in teaching and learning. Her approach to teaching isn't a novelty, it's a necessity.

Edward C.

Thank you for your wonderful post! What you shared provides us all with real HOPE for the future of educational reform. What you are doing is planting the seeds of creativity and problem-solving among your students, encouraging their personal agency, and making learning RELEVANT.

A constructivist approach is the very basis of my years of teaching and counseling, and is amazingly powerful and effective because it raises self-efficacy.

If you're interested, we've started a national/international Tweet Chat [#schools2life] and a LinkedIn support platform for longer discussions, about the major transition all students experience from their K12 schools to life. The goal is to start a dialogue among parents and K12 teachers, counselors and principals, and encourage collaboration and creative actions that improve how we prepare youth for that major transition.

About the Author



Shelley Wright is a teacher and education blogger in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, Canada. She teaches high school, English and science and also serves as a technology integration coach. Her passion in education is social justice, global education and helping her students make the world a better place. She blogs at [Wright's Room](#). Follow her on Twitter at @wrightsroom.

Ah, Yes. Now I Remember Why I Love This New Pedagogy

Brian Crosby

Like too many teachers in this country, what happens in my classroom is being affected and decided more and more by people and policies outside.

As a consequence, all the test preparation, test practice and other required programs can cut my fifth graders off from pieces of what I think of as the “new pedagogy”– blogging, project and problem based learning – not to mention the “non-tested” curriculum like social studies, science and more. (My school doesn’t allow a scheduled art or PE time, and my mandated schedule calls for 30 minutes per week of science and/or social studies.)

So when we were recently able to get back into blogging (beyond just writing an occasional post); re-energize our “Energizing Energy” science project; and refresh the wiki page and Google Docs collaboration we are involved in with a class 2500 miles away (yes, it takes more than 30 minutes per week, shhh), it reminded me why I have become committed to these new ways of teaching and learning.

My students jumped back in like they were re-connecting with an old friend. Even during a recent week, when we devoted half of each day to taking our state mandated tests (tests that my students, myself, our school and district will be evaluated by), we spent the rest of the day posting blogs and honing our commenting skills.

We commented on others’ posts and also responded to the comments left on our own blogs. We were starting, promoting and inciting conversations – the kind you would have in a friendly letter, but also to ask questions, clarify thinking, and

argue what you believe to be true. It's all higher order thinking – all difficult if done well – and appreciated by almost all my students.



It's also real work, the kind that tends to make my room a purposeful and quiet place where students ask questions about what they don't understand or can't do (when too often, during lessons, they won't). It's full of teachable moments.

These are times when “assessment on the fly” happens and is sometimes immediately addressed by a lesson.

- Over here, I notice students that don't get how to use quotation marks – so let's have a quick lesson on what I'm seeing as I observe groups working. They get what they need right now, when it's right in front of them, even if it's not the language arts standard we're supposed to be covering this week.
- Over there, a few students just don't get the transforming energy thing, so let's stop for a minute and review that in light of what they are doing right this minute. This is when it will be meaningful to them, help them, be a timely resource for them.

When things are humming along like that, it is a beautiful thing to watch and a great place to be. It is energizing for all of us. I wish in this current education environment we could be in that place more often.

We need to learn how to get our students there, and fight to keep them there.

It was a great reminder of why I've been a teacher for 30 years and plan to be for at least 10 more.

The best learning is messy!

//Selected Comments

Virginia Y.

Brian, I'm at the other end of the educational system: universities. I am beginning to see the impact of the "memorize and regurgitate" method of learning that the current focus on testing creates. Over the last two years my students who were top in their class, very capable on paper, are paralyzed when asked to do projects or analyses. I find I am having to teach them how to do an analysis because their schools concentrated on them learning the "curriculum" (content) rather than developing learning and thinking skills.

Since I teach at a state university, a number of my students come from "failing schools." I find these students much deeper thinkers than the top students from "good schools." Their problem, however, is that it has been drummed into them through the press, the educational system and the government that they come from bad schools so they are ill prepared for college. Interestingly, while they are ill prepared in basics such as writing and mathematical calculations, they are so much more creative and analytical than the "good" students. Yet they also lack confidence in their own abilities.

I think it is important to your students that you do take these deviations from the "curriculum" and build these skills that will make them successful in college and the workplace as they develop the ability to problem-solve, learn (self-direction), and communicate.

I am interested, however, in what takes up so much of your school day if there is no art, PE, and only 1/2 hour of science or social studies? I'd be interested to know what your curriculum looks like.

Brian Crosby

Virginia – The short answer is to share my daily schedule, which in the past was always designed by the teacher and based on the "required" number of minutes for each subject. My schedule this year was designed by administration. It includes 2 hours a day of Reading; 1.5 hours a day of math; 45 minutes a day of writing. Throw in that students go home 45 minutes early 1 day a week to make time for faculty planning/meetings; they have one 30 minute trip to the library per week, two 30 minute music classes, and 45 minutes per day for lunch and recess. On my schedule I get to teach science

OR social studies 30 minutes per week. I sneak in a bit more. Also note that what happens during reading block and math block is VERY specific and not open to integration. This is not an isolated situation; I hear similar from colleagues all over.

Karen

I also teach at a university and see that our student teacher candidates are impacted by this type of schedule Brian states. This emphasis on reading and math is most evident in schools with high numbers of English learners and low socio-economics.

It is unfortunate in that the technologies that can best bring about true learning and engagement are limited to “when there is time” rather than being the pedagogy that drives instruction. Also, the loss of PE, Music and Art at many schools have left students feeling less engaged. I applaud you Brian for your commitment to bringing in what is engaging and of value to students.

Scott K.

Brian - In Canada, I am given much more leeway than you describe, so I can't imagine the struggle you must go through. I am now almost exclusively using student-directed, problem-based, inquiry teaching.

The trouble I'm finding is that my colleagues are starting to question my “planning” and my “lessons”. It is hard to explain to them that students often decide, through their actions or questions, what we may focus on each day. I can not prepare a detailed lesson plan for the day or week. I can't tell you “where we'll be” in a week, as the students' response, desire, inquiry leads it all.

I found myself very connected to your line, “We need to learn how to get our students there, and fight to keep them there.” It is this that now makes up my day. It is the fight to allow students real learning, not the ‘out of the box’ pablum often confused with learning. Keep up the good fight!

Virginia Y.

I am sure, Scott, that you also get people perceiving that because you don't have a lesson plan that you really aren't working. In fact, I find I spend much more time on planning (the environment, supports, resources that I can send

student to) than I did when I did a lesson plan. Also, I spend a lot more time monitoring to make sure students are really learning what they need to work on the projects, directing and redirecting them to resources to help support their immediate needs, making them comfortable in trying things and reflecting on what happened, and so forth.

In fact, sometimes I look with envy at colleagues who simply give tests, working from a lesson plan given to them. But then I see the learning taking place and realize I so much prefer to go off the script!

About the Author



Brian Crosby has been a community leader with Powerful Learning Practice and a 28-year classroom teacher in Sparks, Nevada. Brian teaches the intermediate grades and blogs at [Learning is Messy](#). You'll find him on Twitter at @bcrosby.

Evolution of an Information Junkie

Jenny Luca

I recently read a post written by [Colm O'Regan](#) about [Divided Attention Disorder](#). It was yet another one of those articles talking about how our brains are possibly changing as a result of our constant exposure to online information. We've heard similar arguments from Nicholas Carr, who wrote the article "[Is Google making us stupid?](#)" and has gone on to pen [The Shallows](#). (It's worth noting that Nicholas is making a pretty penny cashing in on this message.)

Colm's description of the way he works from day to day sounds very much like me:

“*My Internet browser has 24 tabs open. Among them are three separate attempts to reply to the same e-mail. My online banking session has timed out, and in the corner of my screen a Twitter feed is a never-ending scroll of news and links. Which I click. And click.*”

People with whom I work (and the students I teach) are often incredulous at how many tabs I have open at any one time. It's of no consequence to me; I know what's there and why I have them open. This is how I live now, and I'm perfectly comfortable with it. I don't think my brain is being affected in any way. In fact, if I look back over the years and reflect on my information-seeking history, it's apparent to me that this is just part of my natural evolutionary process.

I've always been an information junkie. When I was a young child, reading was my passion. I consumed books from my school library, and if I could get my hands on a copy of the [Reader's Digest](#), I was in heaven. I loved anything, television media included, that provided me with knowledge – any detail that helped me piece together the workings of the world.

I would latch onto a topic and explore it as best I could, with whatever resources I had at hand. Very often I was limited by the constraints of the age I was living in. If you were obsessed with a subject in the late 1970's (ghostly phenomena was one of mine), what you found on your local library shelves would just have to get you through.

I haven't changed. I'm still an information junkie. What has changed is the world I'm living in and the information I have available at my fingertips 24/7, should I choose to use a computing device and pay for an internet connection. Do I read books as much as I used to? No, I don't. Do I think I need to? Only if they're worth reading and can provide me with more than what I can access for free from online sources.

Is my attention span different? Possibly. But once again, it's the quality of the information that keeps me reading. If something is good, I'll devote the time to read it through. If it contains a hyperlink that causes me to wonder, I may jump from the original source and investigate where it leads. For me, this has just natural daily routine. Yes, I function differently than I did five years ago, but I figure it's part of the evolutionary path an information junkie follows in the connected age.

Today's student information junkie

When I think of the students I teach, there are some who are clearly insatiable seekers of information and others who are content to be shown the way. That's something else that hasn't changed much, and as teachers, we need to differentiate instruction to respond to all kinds of learners.

Still, as a teacher librarian, what interests me most is this: How are we catering to the needs of the information junkies we have in our classrooms today? The inquisitive 10-year old who wants to know everything there is to know about whale sharks, or dark matter or bridge construction. The 15-year old who finds the four-week unit on the Vietnam War just a brush stroke on the full canvas she wants to paint of that era.

Are we doing enough in our schools to find ways for deep investigation of topics that students find fascinating? Should we make more room in our curriculum to foster independent research based on individual interests? Are we guiding

students who feel driven to self-direct their own learning toward production tools like blogs that will allow them to demonstrate their knowledge base and potentially make meaningful connections with experts in their field of interest?

My experience tells me that the opportunities and support for students like these are few and far between in many schools that continue to deliver a content-heavy curriculum. If you're a young information junkie, you're probably going to have to explore what really interests you in your time away from school.

For those of us who began life with the pen-and-paper model of learning, but a naturally inquisitive nature, the internet has opened up vast possibilities. For others, it's different. I had a conversation with a close friend about this very thing. She has no desire to spend hours looking at a computer screen. She's happy with the old-school way she lives her life. I respect that. Do I think her life may change as more and more of how we access information transfers to the Web? Yes, I do. Will she be like me? I doubt it.

She's not an information junkie, you see. We're a class all our own. If you're a teacher (junkie or not), try and recognize this breed within your herd. They need your encouragement — and plenty of space to roam and grow.

//Selected Comments

Patti G.

I am not alone! I had to look at my browser and see exactly how many tabs I had open as I was reading. Only 8 – a light day. Facebook, 2 email accounts, my Google reader, Twitter, Diigo, and a couple of links from my reader.

I have a hard time understanding how folks can watch TV all night when there is so much more available! Maybe it just satisfies my wandering mind. I agree with you though – I don't think it creates attention deficit – I think it appeals to those who already like the stimulation and does not appeal to those who don't want to be barraged with information.

I started having “[Free to Learn Fridays](#)” with my 3rd graders this past year to let them explore all those wonderful, insatiable curiosities. As a result, it looks like I’ll have 1:1 netbooks in my room next year as opposed to having to lug the laptop cart across the building every Friday! Thanks for a great post, Jenny.

Jenny Luca

Patti, it’s nice to know there is another like me out there! I love your idea of ‘Free to learn Fridays’! Good on you for recognising the need and providing opportunities for your students. That’s the beauty of working in what we in Australia call Primary School. I would love to have a bit of flexibility in the upper grades but our Secondary education system does not allow it. We have people closely tied to subject matter and in some cases, they are pushing their own barrows to ensure job security. I think we have to think bigger than that, and value what matters to the development of the person rather than what matters to us.

Edna S.

I can identify! In fact, I currently have two different browsers open and a whole lot of tabs in each. And I love to read! I work in an [IB PYP](#) school, where inquiry underpins teaching and learning. Our students are encouraged to be curious and they have plenty of opportunities to inquire, explore and investigate through trans-disciplinary units of inquiry. And yet... not all teachers are inquirers themselves. I’m sure this limits the learning and inquiry in those classes.

Jenny Luca

Thanks for your reply, Edna. You make a very good point about some teachers not being inquirers. I see this too. We need to foster our young people and encourage some who have the insatiable desire to learn to go for it! Maybe there’s a need to fit information junkie teachers with their younger counterparts?

Sister Geralyn

You have described what a life-long learner is all about: a person marveling at the complexity of life and enjoying every turn on the road! It’s the turns and the unexpected twists where pure learning takes place.

Lorraine R.

Your blog illustrates how the discussion about connectivity and personalization for all is ongoing and has multiple perspectives. This is important for me as I bring new resources and testimonials of the benefits of participating (connectivity) and the challenges (junkie factor) to teachers and peers who have yet to engage.

About the Author



Jenny Luca is a Teacher-Librarian from Melbourne, Australia who is passionate about exploring the potential of new technologies in educational settings. She writes the blog [Lucaccept - Intercepting the Web](#) and has presented at conferences in Australia and internationally. Follow Jenny on Twitter @jennyluca.

Gearing Up for the Big Game

Renee Hawkins



It's Superbowl Sunday and my husband is gearing up for the Big Game. It's only 9:00 am but he has prepared the menu (enchiladas) and is online reading about the game. He pours over the Sports Illustrated website, along with ESPN's and the NFL's. He doesn't subscribe to blogs or tweet about his love of football.

It makes me a little crazy to tell you the truth.

Why would he not want to go deeper, read more, join a conversation, and share his many opinions on the qualifications of the coaches, the officials, and the players with someone other than me? Seriously. It's hard to fathom.

Case in point. I shared the following tweet with him:

To use the night to watch a sport I do not understand, with players I do not know who is. So that I can brag about it on Tuesday. #superbowl

less than a minute ago via web

Lars Hansen
HansenLars

He didn't think it was funny. I couldn't stop wiping the tears from my eyes.

Having a good laugh is only part of the reason I shared it with him. This tiny little exchange is an example of a door that was once shut tight but now thrown wide open. I am able to laugh at a joke from a young man from Oslo, Norway because I happened to find him in a Twitter post. I found him in Twitter because people from around the world are pointing their thoughts to one place: #superbowl. I am able to translate Norwegian into English thanks to Google Translate. And I am able to share it with you because of this blog. In itself, it isn't very significant, but the potential is great. Behold: the power of the network!

I'm the first to admit that I'm new to this. Little by little, I'm becoming more confident using these new tools to connect with other teachers and like-minded individuals around the world. As a child I knew instinctively that reading was powerful, that mastering those skills would be empowering. I feel the same way about the tools I use to connect to my PLN - my personal learning network.

How I power up my PLN

My network feeds my professional soul. First, I follow smart people. I remind my students that I too, stand on the shoulders of giants. Whether through blogs, tweets, or [TED Talks](#), I learn from the finest thinkers in and out of my field.

Second, I seek out master teachers in all disciplines. Thanks to my participation in a [Powerful Learning Practice](#) community, I was able to [connect](#) (literally) via Elluminate with Silvia Tolisano (@langwitches), who shared the documents she uses to help her elementary teachers to “21st centur-ize” their curriculum. Bill Ferriter (@plugusin), a 6th grade social studies teacher, shared examples of student learning that facilitates social change. I listened to and chatted with Dolores Gende (@dgende), an AP Physics teacher, who so engages her students in their own learning, they speak of having a “passion” for science. These are my teachers too. The examples from their teaching that they so willing share help guide and improve my own practice.

Third, I need help. That’s the substance of tweets I send out to the world. I’ve asked for help to learn more about Microsoft’s Kodu programming application for young students and the qualities of a 21st Century Technology Coordinator. Recently an acquaintance who works for Facebook wanted to know if teachers were using Facebook in their classroom. I went straight to Twitter. Later, I asked her for feedback “to gauge the reach and effectiveness of my network.” She replied,

“I think that it was really useful, especially once I picked up on the #edchat and #edtech conversations. Got some great stuff culling through those, some of which I was able to use yesterday and some of which I’m sure I’ll have occasion to use in the future.”

Fourth, my network extends the reach of my students. I can use the relationships built through Twitter, blogs, and [Ning](#) discussions to find readers and commenters for my students’ work. Because my reach is global, so is that of my students. Are you a teacher looking for collaborators for a [VoiceThread](#) project? Would you like to give your students the British perspective on the American Revolution? Or have your students gain a global perspective on something in the news (#Egypt, #Tahrir) or the President’s State of the Union address (#sotu)? Twitter can help make it all happen, often by employing a powerful tool first put forth by Twitter users themselves: the [hashtag](#).

How about helping your students build a readership for their blogs? Send out a tweet using #comments4kids and ask the members of your network to help you spread the word (and the hashtag). It may take awhile and require some persistence at first, but it's worth it in the end, when the comments begin to flow back. Once your students have a real audience they are no longer students, they are writers. I get excited when I discover another red dot on the Cluster Map in my blog. Can you imagine how motivating it is for a fifth grader?

Your professional toolkit needs a PLN

Making the effort to grow and cultivate a personal learning network is essential to today's teacher. It should be part of our professional toolkit and viewed as important as face-to-face, bricks and mortar, or professional development opportunities — maybe even more so. As I thought about this, I sent out the following tweet:

Help me complete this sentence: "A personal learning network is as essential to today's teacher as is...?"

#plpnetwork, #edchat

less than a minute ago via web

Renee Hawkins
rhawk

Here are some of my favorite answers:

@rhawk their belief in being a learner themselves

less than a minute ago via web

Robin Ellis
robinellis

“@rhawk: Help me complete this sentence: “A personal learning network is as essential to today’s teacher as is professional development

less than a minute ago via Twitter for iPhone

Wes Warner
I_teach_ICT

@rhawk as essential to today’s teacher as is appropriate training and critical thinking.

less than a minute ago via TweetDeck

Renee Hawkins
rhawk

We model so much for our students. Why not model the building and use of a personal learning network? Why not demonstrate the learning power embedded in a connected world?

//Selected Comments

Delores G.

Renee, you clearly articulate the value of Twitter. I particularly like your fourth component: "My network extends the reach of my students." This is so true! As we grow our personal (and professional) learning networks through social networking, we grow as educators and that has an invaluable effect in our classrooms.

Through Twitter I have been able to connect real-time on topics that matter to me: I follow #edchat on Tuesdays and #scichat on Wednesdays and then #isedchat on Thursdays. Plus I get up to the minute news of excellent webinars held by PLP members, or Steve Hargadon's 'Future of Education' talks, or I am able to keep up with the highlights of a conference that I have not been able to attend by following a hashtag like #naisac11 or #iste12. What can be more fun than professional development that is free, relevant and accessible through my phone?

Chris S.

Renee, this is a wonderful description of the importance of a PLN. Your example of the Norwegian tweet and its larger, implied significance (“a door that was once shut tight is now thrown wide open”) is particularly relevant to me. I too find that the interconnectedness that I feel when I am “among” those in my PLN is so empowering. I can’t image going back to the days of closed doors.

Diana G.

Fantastic post! You explain the power of PLNs so simply and effectively. It gives me goosebumps to think about the ease with which we can connect with others around the world. I am definitely going to use #comments4kids to gain readers for my students on their blogs.

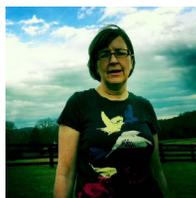
Rachel H.

Blogging to a global audience seems exhilarating and intimidating at the same time. Helping students to FEEL something about the work they are doing is vital to their motivation and perseverance. Giving them an authentic audience (other than the classroom teacher) is invaluable. Thanks for the ideas on how to promote students’ writing!

Marsha R.

I think we can all “use the help,” as you say. All of us are stronger thru the process of sharing and helping each other. It is one of the strengths of our profession. Thanks for this encouragement to remember how important we are for each and to each other.

About the Author



Renee Hawkins is a 4th/5th grade teacher and Director of Instructional Technology at Garrison Forest School, a nursery-to-grade 12 girls’ school near Baltimore, Maryland, and co-author (with Texas educator Susan Lucille Davis) of the blog [The Flying Trapeze](#). A teacher for 28 years, she has taught in the U.S. and Japan. Follow Renee on Twitter @rhawk.

Twitter for Teachers: Hashtag PD!

Patti Grayson

When I first joined Twitter about a year ago, I signed on to follow my teenage daughters (stalker mom extraordinaire). Among their group of friends, they frequently used hashtags (#) at the end of their tweets such as #justsayin or #awkward to express their feelings at the time. Some of them are quite amusing!



After I began using Twitter for professional reasons to help build my PLN ([Personal Learning Network](#)), I saw hashtags being used by people at conferences: #NAIS, #ISTE11, etc. By “marking” tweets in this way, people could send a message to fellow tweeps who were at the conference or had an interest in the goings-on. Followers of the hashtag didn’t have to keep up with lots of attendees because savvy tweeters were all using #ISTE11 (for example) on tweets about the meeting.

Here’s how it works: With a free tool like [TweetDeck](#) (my choice) or [Hootsuite](#), Twitter users can create a search column for #ISTE11 and the software will filter all tweets carrying that hashtag into that column for review. Brilliant!

As soon as I grasped this concept, I started keeping track of tweets related to [Powerful Learning Practice](#) by keeping a column filtered for #plpnetwork and later #vflr (Voices from the Learning Revolution).

**Months later,
I have an #ahamoment**

What I didn’t realize until this summer (#slowlearner), was the ENORMOUS group of educators who are finding folks to connect, chat and collaborate with by following hashtags. If you are an elementary school teacher and have something to share or want feedback, put #elemchat at the end of your tweet. There are even hashtags for grade levels such as #4thchat. The list is endless – #mathchat, #scichat, #dyslexia, #edreform, #esl... You get the idea. [Cybrary Man](#) (aka master creator of educational link lists) has [a page](#) of educational hashtags.

Live hashtag meet-ups in your specialty area

But wait, there's more! Hashtag "groups" are organizing and having weekly discussions on Twitter! So if you are a 4th grade teacher, for example, you can log into Twitter on Monday nights at 8:00 p.m. EST and join other 4th grade teachers for the #4thchat. You can even [vote on the topic for the chat](#) in advance! I have even "lurked" during #6thchat as they discussed uses for Skype in the classroom. Great ideas!

There are twitter chats for almost every topic/hobby/profession imaginable. There's even one (and this is timely) for new teachers (#ntchat) supported by [an excellent wiki](#) where live chat strings are archived. You'll find a comprehensive list of hashtags across many fields of interest [here](#) on this Google Doc, and Cybrary Man's calendar of educational twitter chats [here](#). Or try Edudemic's list of [300+ hashtags](#).

Have difficulty following a twitter chat? The tweets fly by on my TweetDeck almost faster than I can keep up with them. Check out [TweetChat](#).

Here's more about TweetChat:

TweetChat helps put your blinders on to the Twitter-sphere while you monitor and chat about one topic.

Choosing a hashtag directs you to a TweetChat room. Each tweet automatically gets the hashtag added and the room auto-updates.

You can use the "User Control" area to feature people you like or to block spammers.

"Smart pausing" has been added so when you scroll down the page, it will not refresh, helping you avoid replying to the wrong person.

So why aren't we all using Twitter?

I have gotten so many ideas from Twitter this year, and found so many passionate teachers to follow and collaborate with. It drives me crazy that more educators don't take advantage of these opportunities to learn and connect (and benefit their students) through social media tools like Twitter. [Scott McLeod](#) says it best:

“*In an era in which the possibilities for ongoing professional learning are numerous and significant, I wonder how long will it take for us to start expecting educators to use these social media tools. It’s been 30 years since the advent of the personal computer and we’re still struggling to get teachers and administrators to integrate digital technologies into their daily work in ways that are substantive and meaningful. Meanwhile, we now have a bevy of powerful learning tools available to us that can advance our own professional learning (and, of course, make our technology integration and implementation efforts more efficient and effective).*”

It took me a year to figure out some of these #twitertips (another useful hashtag). I hope this helps more educators to connect more effectively and see the value of Twitter as PD.

What have I missed? Please add helpful tips in the comments!
Tweet Tweet!

//Selected Comments

Karl

An excellent post Patti. Hashtags can certainly help to turn the torrent of information into a trickle. If getting educators onto twitter is the first step, teaching them about hashtags is the second. Well done on how you have explained it.

Kay

Thanks for a concise post on the value of Twitter. So often people ask me "where do you find all of this cool stuff?" and I always admit that my Twitter PLN is a huge source of it! Sometimes I wonder when some of the people on Twitter that I follow find time to sleep! Living in the Southern Hemisphere, I always awake to a huge bounty of new ideas and conversation that's been tweeted overnight.

Patti Grayson

Thanks, Karl and Kay! People complain about being limited to 140 characters, but that is often enough to tweet out a link to a great read or resource (especially with shortened URLs). That's where Twitter does it for me – When I don't have a great deal of time, I can hop on and pick up a few gems. When I do have more time, I can set my tweets to pop up while I work or decide to participate in a live chat. In every instance, I've found some outstanding educators who love to share!

Marsha R.

In my work as a middle school science teacher, I definitely relate to connecting with teachers from #scichat and #6thchat. Slowly I'm developing a personal learning network through what I now know to be "hashtag meetups."

I first found people who shared common interests and narrowed it down to people with whom I would want to develop closer working ties.

Thanks for your thinking.

John N.

Patti – thanks for pointing me to TweetChat. It comes in very handy in live sessions and at conferences, etc. when the tweets are literally flying by. Being able to control the pace with a click in TweetChat makes it possible to cope with the tweet stream. With this article, you've helped filled a gap in knowledge for all those teachers who fall between "Don't Care Yet" and "I'm All Ed-Techy Now."

Brenda

Thanks for this post, Patti, I'll be sharing experiences about using Twitter and developing a PLN with a group of pre-service teachers soon, and I'll definitely point them to this post.

Sandy K.

Patti, thanks for a wonderful, clear, and detailed blog post on the value of hashtags! I have bookmarked this post and will definitely use it as a resource when preparing for a "Twitter for Professional Development" workshop I am presenting at the Texas Computer Education Association convention.

Leacy

A really great post. I've only recently started using twitter and the possibilities for PD seem endless. Really looking forward to making more connections and learning from experienced teachers over the coming year.

About the Author



Patti Grayson is an elementary teacher at Virginia's Hampton Roads Academy and a member of the school's digital learning leadership team. This year she's teaching fourth grade, which she likes very much. She blogs at [Patti's Ponderings](#). Follow her on Twitter @pattigrayson.

TURNING UP THE JUICE

Inquiry Learning: This Isn't Scary at All

Growing Self-Directed Learners: Baby Steps

Global Learning the Primary Way

**Thanks to Our Faculty Ning Community,
We're Collaborating Like Never Before**

**5 Reasons Why Our Students Are
Writing Blogs and Creating ePortfolios**

Inquiry Learning: This Isn't Scary at All

Shelley Wright

I love the first day of school, as much now as when I was a child. The reason I love it so much? I have an inquiry classroom. I teach chemistry and biology and both are inquiry and project-based. However, it looks different in each class.

In my chemistry class, my students have been wrestling with basic scientific concepts — the scientific method, mixtures, and different methods of separating heterogeneous and homogenous substances.

Day One: Building some context

The first day, we began with a lab. Constructivism tells us that new knowledge must build on previous knowledge. So we began with building towers. The task was to build a tower, as tall as each lab group could, using toothpicks and sponges cut into one inch squares. Each group had ten minutes. Upon hearing the assignment, one of my students said to me, “This isn’t scary at all. I thought Chemistry would be really scary and hard, but I can do this.”

One might think this is an easy task, and that’s mostly true, but some of the towers were pretty precarious. After 10 minutes of construction (or sooner if the structure was about to topple) we measured the results. The highest was about 36 inches.

Their next task was to build a second tower. However, this time they could change one of the variables, either the toothpicks for long skewers, the sponges for a different type of sponge, or the design itself. The goal? To create a taller tower.

Before we began this activity, I introduced the scientific method — purpose, hypothesis, materials, procedure, results, and conclusion — which gave them a way to think through what and how they were building.

Many groups took the skewers. Some were able to build taller towers with them, some were not. It all depended on the design they started with. One group realized early during their experiment that taking the skewers was a mistake. The skewers made their design too flimsy to stand up.



Ultimately, most groups were able to build taller towers; the tallest was 85 inches. What does this have to do with chemistry specifically? Nothing. With the scientific method? Everything. The day after the experiment, we had a shared experience for reference as we talked about things like qualitative and quantitative data, dependent and independent variables, and why there can only be one independent variable. They were able to attach all of these scientific words to knowledge they built the previous day.

Unit one done. No notes. No test.

Day Three: Inquiring minds want to know

On day three, we looked at mixtures. Normally we would take notes about heterogeneous & homogeneous mixtures. Not this year. At the beginning of class, my students watched me pour 1 kg of salt, 500g of sand, and 250g of pepper into a big bowl. I mixed it together. I looked at my students and said, “Now separate them.”

They weren’t given a recipe lab to follow. They had to create their own procedure, likely for the first time ever in school.

As far as I know, cutting edge scientists don’t rely on prepackaged experiments in lab research. Rather, they need to understand the underpinning scientific principles well enough to know how to apply them in any particular situation. So shouldn’t my classroom promote that knowledge and those skills? I wonder how much the science we teach in our classrooms resembles what chemists or biologists actually do.

I find in chemistry, it’s not always the what that is most important, it’s the why. Students can follow a recipe lab from beginning to end, reach the correct outcome, and have no idea why any of it occurred. It’s common to find students performing labs where they do things like determine which of two paper towel brands is the most absorbent. That’s not science. That’s

product testing. Students can determine absorbency without knowing why paper towels absorb in the first place — or what factors make them more or less able to soak things up.

A group of students asked if they could use Google. Nope. While I love Google, for this lab it was not an option. I want my students to learn to think and problem-solve.

The creativity they exhibited as they sought to separate the mixture was incredible. A number of groups dumped their mixture into water, which dissolved the salt. The mixture was then poured through a funnel with filter paper. The salt was removed this way. A few groups then dumped the sand and pepper into another beaker of water. The sand sank and the pepper floated. Pretty smart. The pepper could then be skimmed off the top, separating the pepper from the sand. Most groups boiled the water to evaporate it.

One of my students, at the outset of the experiment, asked for a balloon. I thought, “what in the world are you going to do with that?” She rubbed it on the hair of a fellow group member, and placed it above the mixture. It pulled the pepper out of the mixture, and it stuck to the balloon. Brilliant.

Pepper has a negative charge and the balloon, because of the electricity created, had a positive one. Never in a million years would I have thought of that, and I told them as much.

Day Four: Failure reigns

On day four, I ask my students if they know what creates colour. They don't, but they tell me the spectrum is ROYGBIV. Well, we have to start somewhere. So if black isn't part of the spectrum, how is it created? A few students suggest that colours are combined to create black. They're right. I hold up a black marker and tell them their job is to separate the colours. Again, no recipe lab.

I have never had students work so hard to solve a problem and fail so badly. Different groups tried filter paper in combination with rubbing alcohol, iodine, vinegar, peroxide, bleach. Nothing they tried worked, which, for me, is a bit shocking. I was certain they would know how to do it because they've either seen, or been told about, this experiment at a younger grade. It makes

me wonder just how much scientific knowledge from previous grades my students have actually retained.

At one point, one of my students looked at me and said, “I think we’ve learned every way not to separate the colours in black ink.” And that’s not unusual in science. For the first time in my teaching, I had meaningful conversations with my students about the high failure rate of real scientific experiments and the tenacity it takes to do scientific research. Failing isn’t a bad thing. It’s one experiment closer to finding the answer.

I wonder how many of our students think that scientific research splits nicely into one-hour chunks and always comes with a tidy conclusion at the end?

I also show them a beaker of saturated sugar-water. Their job is to separate the sugar from the water. The only stipulation is that they can’t boil it.

A few groups thought to use a string in the sugar-water; with enough time sugar crystallizes on the string. Other groups did not. At one point, a student was talking about using a device to split the water molecules so that only the sugar would remain. This experiment allowed me to talk to my students about [Occam’s Razor](#), which states that among competing hypotheses, it’s usually best to select the one that makes the fewest new assumptions.

I first learned about Occam’s razor (or the law of parsimony) in Biology 100, during my first year of university. Until now, I’d never used it. Never had a need to. But students using inquiry for the first time devise some pretty complicated solutions that often don’t work. They *need* Occam’s razor.

In the end, very few students had an experiment that was successful. After we talked about how to reach the intended conclusion, my students asked if they should write what actually happened in their lab, even though it was a failure, or if instead they might write about what should have happened. My students have an aversion to failure, likely from years of experiencing a grading system that imprints failure is bad and to be avoided at all costs, even if you have to falsify your report.

These last three experiments allowed us to talk about additional scientific words: distillation, crystallization, filtration, soluble and insoluble, and other expressions and processes involved in separating solutions.

Five days. Two units completed. A few notes on the wiki. No exams.

Messy and real

This is the first time since I began teaching science that I've had real conversations about what science looks and feels like, and it's a mess. There's more failure than success, but we're still at the beginning. The most exciting thing is that I have students who are fully engaged in the pursuit of scientific discovery. For the first time, my students have been responsible for creating their own labs — from purpose to conclusion.

This week I've come to question the most common procedures that we use to transmit knowledge and gauge learning. I wonder how and why notes and tests became the summation of our student's acquisition of knowledge and understanding, and what it will take to put us back on the path to real learning.

//Selected Comments

Teresa B.

Shelley, thank you so much for sharing your approach to instruction. I work with schools as a coach for Authentic Intellectual Work, and it is so refreshing to see a teacher putting students in the shoes of scientists (or historians, artists, etc.) in order to provide authentic learning experiences for them. I'm sure your students are learning far more than they would ever learn using a traditional approach to teaching. Kudos to you!

Geralyn S.

I almost wish I was in your classroom as a student. Amazing! So much of scientific experiment leads to failure. I believe that failure is absolutely important in the learning process. But in the environment that you described, failure does not carry the stigma that it normally has. Keep up the good work!

Marsha R.

Thank you so much for writing this post. This kind of learning is definitely messy and scary. But not so much that, as an adult, I shouldn't take on the challenge of offering the gigantic benefits to my science students.

What most pops out for me is the way your students will now go about thinking about science. The structures you've created seem more real-world than the normal classroom. What would happen if every teacher started teaching without knowing the "answers" at the end of the lab? What if we, as you have done, began to learn alongside our students? Definitely a game changer in that students would take part of the power we normally hold. Yet I think we would actually re-invest anything we "lost" in a different kind of relationship with them — one that would be more powerful for them in the long run.

Failure can only be bad, in my mind, if we learn nothing from the experience. And, as you've pointed out, if you learn valuable information that can be used for the next phase of the work, then it's actually incredibly beneficial.

Thanks for writing this post and helping so many of us imagine what could be by reading a real-life example of what already is!

Shelley Wright

Thanks, Marsha. I really appreciate your words, since I know you live this out in your classroom too. I certainly agree with your statement that there needs to be a shift in power. I think teachers are often afraid that they won't be able to "control" their classroom, if some of that power is given up. But, in truth, I've found the opposite to be true. My students don't care that I may not know all of the answers. Not knowing makes me a real person. And that changes the relationship for the better.

Margaret H.

I think this is such a great approach to learning. I wonder if you are thinking of how you will cover all the traditional chemistry content within this format or if you are redesigning the process and not worrying so much about coverage of content?

I also have a question about external assessments. Are there external –as in national or provincial exams or things like the SAT Chemistry subject test for which you have to prepare your students?

Shelley Wright

I still have to teach all of the traditional content that is part of a typical chemistry class. Our chemistry splits into 20 & 30 levels. At the end of Chem 30, my students have to write a provincial exam.

Some of the content we'll learn by experiment, some my students will learn by researching and creating their own notes. I also use the flipped classroom approach for teaching content, when my students need small chunks of information to keep moving forward. And it's likely that for formulas, I'll use direct instruction.

I think this is a much more balanced, student-centred approach than lecturing all the time. My students seem to enjoy it more too!

About the Author



Shelley Wright is a teacher and education blogger in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, Canada. She teaches high school, English and science and also serves as a technology integration coach. Her passion in education is social justice, global education and helping her students make the world a better place. She blogs at [Wright's Room](#). Follow her on Twitter at @wrightsroom.

Growing Self-Directed Learners: Baby Steps

Becky Bair

Learning a new strategy to try with my students is like opening an amazing present on my birthday. I can't wait to put all the pieces together and start using it. After learning so many new tools last year during my [PLP](#) experience, I couldn't wait to try out some of them with my students. More importantly, my experience changed my philosophy of education, [as I wrote about here](#). I want my classroom to be a place where students become responsible owners of their learning process.

Introducing the tools last year and using them to help my students become connected learners and develop authentic audiences was very positive. I learned what worked and what didn't, and I was eager to make a fresh start this fall in a brand new building at a brand new grade level. If I was going to be creating new units, then — as one of my favorite sayings goes — I was going to “Go big or go home!”

I've begun this year with the determination to make student choice the center of my classroom. I will figure out how to mesh my required curriculum with the interests of my students. While I take a step back, I will nudge my kids to step forward. Here is some of what I'm doing and planning to do to implement my new philosophy of learning.

More authentic strategies

I am blessed to have a teammate who appreciates my new and different vision, and along with my student teacher the three of us have implemented the [Daily 5 workshop strategies](#) to provide authentic reading and writing opportunities for our kids. We began [blogging](#) so our students would have authentic audiences. Rather than leveled reading groups where teachers choose the texts, we're implementing [Daily CAFE reading groups](#) so that students can practice the skills learned in our whole group lessons using self-selected books. In social studies we're planning for units and projects that incorporate technologies, like GPS units and Skype, that the students use in their real lives.

The start of our Pennsylvania school year was pretty crazy with historic flooding cutting our first week of school to a day and a half and a variety of other events creating breaks or pauses in our routine. But throughout it all we have remained focused on building community, developing independent work routines, and preparing our students to take a more active role in their learning.

Our first opportunity presented itself when we moved away from the beginning CAFE strategies and began introducing the reading skills and strategies in our district's curriculum. While we are no longer required to use the stories in the district-selected reading anthology, my teammate suggested a story from the collection that went over well with 4th graders she taught last year.

It's a fictional tale, based on the Iditarod Great Sled Race. I recognized before we started that 9 and 10 year olds in central Pennsylvania would have very little background knowledge about the race. So on the first day of the unit, the students viewed some [short video clips](#) and had time to peruse the [Iditarod's blog](#). I asked them to write down any facts they thought they knew about the Iditarod and any questions they had.

I compiled the ideas and questions, and as we read the story, we highlighted the ideas that were correct, and we answered a few of the questions the students had. But at the end of the story we found that a majority of our questions had not been answered. I knew this was going to be the case, and I was excited to share with the kids that we would be taking the time to learn about what THEY wanted to know. There would be no test, there would be no bubbles to fill in. We were just going to have the chance to have some fun while we were learning.

And then the next few days happened

I have two very different groups of amazing students. They are unique and special, and I am thankful that I have been given the opportunity to make a difference for them all. But as these next few days progressed, we noticed that some of our students were really struggling just to get along with each other to complete a task. Something as simple as sharing a pack of

markers was accompanied by squeals of “Give me that!” and whines of, “Stop it!!”

With each group activity in social studies, I became more and more worried about the looming first attempt at giving up control to my students. I honestly was not sure what I was going to do. I was SO excited to finally use that gift of time I had opened, and now it looked like my gift might turn out to be a dud. I’ll admit, [I got down and I was sad](#). I just wasn’t sure about moving forward.

It was the very next morning, while I was reading through some discussion in the online community for a course I’m taking, that I saw [an article](#) by Gerry Sexton, shared by one of my classmates. It began: *Life would be so much better if only we could figure out what it is that makes self-directed learners self-directed... And how to put that stuff in a bottle.*

As I read Sexton’s six “invisible assets” of self-directed learners, it struck me that even though my online course is about coaching adults, the very same principles apply to the students in our classroom. But if we find it difficult to get adults to adopt the behaviors of self-directed learners, how would I teach my kids these things?

I decided that I would develop some questions based on Sexton’s principles and talk about them with our kids before each project. My questions looked like this:

1. What is our purpose? What are we trying to do or learn during this project?
2. If you could do or learn it in ANY way, what would you do?
3. What are you good at that could help your team?
4. Which part of the project do you want to be part of?
5. What do you think will be hard? What might our team mess up? Why is making mistakes a GOOD thing?

6. How can working with others help us complete this project?

How it played out

After reflecting upon the article and coming up with these questions, I also came to another realization. Following the same exact process with both of my groups might be equitable but would not have been fair. The struggles that some of my students were having working in teams would probably negate any benefits gained from approaching this learning through the PBL model. They needed some baby steps first.

So we started both groups by exploring answers to my six questions — and the students' responses confirmed my choice to approach things differently. One group struggled to remember where we got the questions. And when I asked them why we would learn something if there wasn't a test on it, they weren't sure what to say. It was difficult for them to think about something they were good at that would help the team complete their task, and we ended up brainstorming the jobs people might need to do.

The reactions of this group reassured me that I'd done the right thing by pulling back on the reins and helping them work through a limited number of the questions, going one step at a time. Were there still challenges? Yes. Do we have work to do? Yes. But each of this group's teams was ultimately able to share what they did well as a team, and tell what teamwork skills still need some practice. For our first project, in my eyes, that is a success.

The second group also confirmed my decision with their answers to my six questions. They spent two days at school, and some time at home, working on finding the answers to their more extensive list of Iditarod questions. This group also worked with me to brainstorm the various jobs that needed to be done to pull the answers together. Beyond that, my student teacher and I were hands off, only stepping in to answer minor questions and to see how things were going. Teams were cooperating and getting work done. We even heard rumors of dog costumes. For our first project, in my eyes, this was a success, too.

Sometimes new learning experiences, just like gifts, don't work as we expect they will. You probably won't end up implementing them just like someone else did or the way you originally imagined you might. But in the end, if you're making a change for the better — if you're helping students take steps, even baby steps, to becoming more independent learners, that's progress, and progress is what really matters.

//Selected Comments

Margaret H.

I love this idea of baby steps. I teach juniors and seniors and know that they still need help with collaborative PBL. I also know that in three years, when I get this year's seventh graders, I won't be worrying about helping my students become better self-directed learners as they will have had much more experience in this than my current students. As we navigate this transformation, it is very much a both and process for our students and for us as teacher/learners. Thank you for putting into words what I was experiencing just this week!

Becky Bair

Margaret, you hit on such an important point in your comment. Just like the kids are learning to go through this process, so are the teachers. This is so very different than the way we all learned in school, and it certainly isn't easy, but it will be worth it in the end.

As teachers working to learn new things, it's nice to know we're not alone. The more people who share what worked for them and what didn't, the easier it will be for us make this shift!

Renee H.

I've been investigating and talking about Blended Learning at my (middle grades) school, and one question I'm asked most often is how would our students know what to do if a teacher wasn't in the classroom to show them. That's when I speak to teachers about the need for our students to become self-directed and self-motivated learners. My argument is that this should be a stated outcome for all our students, as it prepares them to be the "life long learners" we teachers say we are trying to produce.

Like you, I think we need to be deliberate in the ways we design our curriculum so that we provide students ways to learn and practice these skills. Thank you for sharing your story and approach to teaching these critical skills. It can and should be part of the curriculum for even our youngest learners. This is how we “grow it forward” so that our oldest students graduate ready to meet the challenges of college and work in this new era.

About the Author



Becky Bair teaches the intermediate grades in Pennsylvania’s Elizabethtown Area School District and is passionate about incorporating technology as one of many tools to help students view learning as an exciting, lifelong endeavor. She writes the blog [Teach 'N' Life](#) and can be followed on Twitter @becky7274.

Global Learning: The Primary Way

Kathy Cassidy

On the first day of grade one, as we were thinking about our goals for the year, my students and I talked on [Skype](#) with three people who live in different places around North America. These educators all told us what they had learned in their first year of school.

Before we made the first call, I explained what we were going to do. I'll never forget Carson's question: "Why would we do that?"

Why, indeed.

Just like their older counterparts, primary children love to connect with people from places around the world. Connections bring new perspectives, ideas, and learning in a way nothing else can. I could tell them that children everywhere on Earth play games and go to school just as they do, but when they are actually able to link with a [class in Colorado](#) or in [New Zealand](#) and ask questions themselves, the learning experience is much more powerful and lasting.

[Our classroom blog](#) is often the first way that we connect with people outside of our school. This year, each child posted an article in their [individual blog space](#) during the first week of school. To show them the connections that their blog could bring them, I invited people in my [Twitter](#) network to comment on one of the student's blogs and mention their location. In my tweet, I included the hashtag #comments4kids.

My Canadian mid-prairie six-year olds were amazed to find they had comments from places they'd only heard of — Texas, New York, Ontario. As we read each location aloud, it elicited a small collective gasp. Later we visited the blogs of a couple of other primary classrooms. I reminded my writers about how they felt when they received comments, and they happily helped me compose comments for their fellow bloggers in schools far away.

Building global awareness

In my classroom our group reading and writing activities often center on commenting or reading blog comments sent to us, building the children's sense of membership in a global community. Comments that have been written directly to our class or to an individual child in the room are extremely meaningful text for young children, and engagement is high. Some of the most fun comes when the children begin to use their developing editing skills to find spelling or grammar mistakes in the comments from adults.

We often connect with other teachers, classrooms and "experts" [using Skype](#). The students are astounded when they realize that while we are in school, it is the middle of the night for our friends in [Brisbane, Australia](#). They marvel at the differences in our weather and seasons, and ask questions about why the students are all dressed the same and why they talk so funny. We use Skype to find out about mundane things such as what other people eat for breakfast or their Christmas [traditions](#) — or more extraordinary things like [information about rocks and minerals from a professional geologist](#).

Whatever the topic, these are all themes that support our grade one curriculum. The fact that we connect with others from around the world to learn these things gives the students an awareness of the wonderful diversity of the global family we are all part of, even as they learn science or social studies outcomes. On some occasions, we have used wikis to collect information. We have asked people to contribute to our [one thousand names wiki](#) or our [rituals wiki](#). We have collaborated with other classrooms to create [a wiki of alphabet videos](#) or a [names wiki](#).

We are fearless. We never say, "Oh, we can't possibly do that — we're just first grade."

I am able to find people and classes to connect with our classroom fairly easily because I am personally connected to a network of educators online. This network has shifted over time, but is now centered mainly in Twitter. I am continually encouraged by the willingness to share, and the support and caring that educators display in that space.

By the end of the school year, Carson and all of my students can answer his question about why we connect with others from around the world. The simple answer is because we can learn from them.

//Selected Comments

Paula N.

You and you first graders are such an inspiration to educators worldwide. I remember learning about all of the wonderful ways you have your students becoming global citizens several years ago, and you got me moving in that direction. I have been using Skype, Edmodo, kidblogs, and other ways to get my fourth graders connected for a past several years, thanks to you.

Kathy Cassidy

I'm so glad to hear that you are finding ways to connect with other classrooms. Once you have done it, there really is no going back, is there?

Deb

I love the way you have reflected on Carson's simple yet powerful question. I have set up a #globalclassroom through VoiceThread and it too has been an amazing experience for all involved. Something so simple as what animals did you see on the way to school today? produces amazing responses. Thanks for sharing the value in global education, and thank you Carson for asking why.

About the Author



Kathy Cassidy is an award-winning first grade teacher who incorporates technology into her classroom to give her students an authentic audience and a portal to the world. She shares her classroom happenings in [several online spaces](#). Her [classroom blog](#) features many stories and images of her young students doing their 21st century work.

Thanks to Our Faculty Ning Community, We're Collaborating Like Never Before

Patti Grayson

This past spring, our school's digital learning team completed a year of professional development through [Powerful Learning Practice](#) (PLP). As a final activity, we were asked to design an [action research project](#). Our project goal: Use 21st century tools to increase collaboration among our faculty. Here's how it all played out.

Our school is independent, Pre-K to 12, and our three divisions (lower school, middle school, and upper school) are physically separated. Traditionally, that physical space has been very isolating — so much so that we often joked about working together without ever seeing each other.

At some point I and my digital-team colleagues expect to engage the faculty in collaborations with other educators across the globe — whether through Twitter, blogs, social networking, or other means. However, it made no sense to take that giant leap before we showed them the ease and benefits of collaborating within our own walls.

The tool we've chosen to do that is Ning. At <http://www.ning.com> you can create your own social network for a modest fee. Our Ning is password protected, and only faculty members may join. We knew this would be a safe place for us to connect and learn.

Our project had two main components:

- Our faculty would collaborate by using our private Ning space.
- Our faculty would collaborate by sharing resources on [Diigo](#) (dee-goh), a social bookmarking site (Diigo.com).

The faculty was required to join Diigo and the Ning. They had to bookmark a site in Diigo and follow the bookmarking of a member of our digital learning team. They also had to reply to a discussion on the Ning, and post a discussion of their own.

The Ning was the thing!

We had no idea how successful the Ning would be for our faculty. Here are some of the many benefits we have experienced:

- The main page of the Ning is a great place to post announcements, a connection to the school calendar, and links to blogs. These currently include class blogs, a book review blog by our librarian, and a blog produced this summer by our 8th grade graduates as they toured Europe.
- The main page also features images and videos uploaded by the faculty. Here we have shared photos of class field trips, ideas for room set-up, and inspiring videos by [Ken Robinson](#), [Daniel Pink](#), and more. The page also features an RSS feed, where we can keep up with blogs such as [Free Technology for Teachers](#) and the many educator-writers who blog at [Edutopia.org](#).
- Discussion posts – Anyone can post a discussion in the Forum to share items of interest to all faculty members. Here are few examples of the discussions we had in the first few months (this was also a great way to reduce our email inbox clutter):
 - Recommendations or requests about articles or books
 - Requests for readers in our kindergarten classes
 - Debates about block scheduling
 - Advantages of eBooks over textbooks
 - Advice in finding a doctor or hairdresser
 - Suggested places for after-work recreation
- Groups – For items that may only interest some faculty members, or where there may be many related discussion posts, Ning makes it easy to create topical subgroups. Here are some subgroups that have sprung up in our Ning space:
 - Netbook Reflections – teachers sharing lesson plans and reflections regarding our 1:1 netbook initiative
 - Crisis in Japan – a group for people that were interested in planning and supporting a fundraising effort after the

earthquake and tsunami

- HRALists – our own version of Craigslist, for people who have items to buy or sell
- Book Talks – discussions about books we have read as a faculty, such as NurtureShock
- Healthy Cooking – a group sharing recipes for healthy eating

Our Ning community is now part of school life

The Ning has connected our faculty in ways we never imagined. We wanted our teachers to connect and share, and share they did! As we got to know each other better, we began to feel a greater sense of community and common purpose.

Our faculty can now easily collaborate on lesson plans and community service projects across divisions. They readily share ideas and resources. We now have a virtual community that parallels our physical community, and Ning's powerful anytime-from-anywhere communications capabilities make us feel closer together than ever. It's well worth the \$25 a month [Ning subscription](#).

Now that our teachers see the benefits of working together and learning from one another, we will spend this year showing them how to use tools to connect them to educators around the world so that they experience all the benefits of being truly connected learners. Before we know it, they will be connecting the world to their classrooms, and leading their students to become connected learners as well.

//Selected Comments

Freya

Sounds like Ning has been a really valuable resource for your school. A number of schools here (in South Australia) are merging to be Reception (first formal year of school) to 12 (final year of school), and this sort of program could be really useful, especially if established as the norm from the get-go.

Patti Grayson

Freya - I think you are absolutely right. It can be difficult to put together a large group of Pre-K (Reception) to grade 12 faculty and students and maintain a strong sense of community. Our school is structured much like yours, and the Ning network helps our teachers share with one another, and also helps us to get the students together.

Last year our 11th grade literature students worked with our 5th graders. They read a book with a small group, led book talks, and helped the 5th graders film trailers promoting a movie of their book! The kids developed great relationships and love it when they run into each other in the hallways!

Renee H.

Patti, you could have been writing about my school. We're a nursery through 12th grade, and we too are spread out over a good-sized campus. We started a school-wide Ning community last year (as part of our PLP Action Research plan) too. The difference is that you have personalized it by providing teachers a place to do book talks, post recommendations (anyone know of a reputable company that sells generators?), share recipes and basically do all those things that we would do if we could all meet in the faculty room. What a great idea to link to the school calendar and student blogs! Thanks for sharing!

Michelle B.

I loved reading about your success and enthusiasm! Getting teachers to understand and to ENJOY on-line collaboration in an open format, like NING, is truly the first step in helping them begin their Web 2.0 journey. Once they "get it," then they can help their students be more effective and productive throughout their educational experience. To have the entire faculty participate together is priceless.

About the Author



Patti Grayson is an elementary teacher at Virginia's Hampton Roads Academy and a member of the school's digital learning leadership team. This year she's teaching fourth grade, which she likes very much. She blogs at [Patti's Ponderings](#). Follow her on Twitter @pattigrayson.

5 Reasons Why Our Students Write Blogs & Create ePortfolios

Jenny Luca

I work in an Independent School in Melbourne, Australia, and this year we have made a commitment to help our students (grades 7-12) create ePortfolios, using an [Edublogs campus](#) as the platform. Here are 5 reasons why we are making student blogging and portfolio development a high priority.

1. Positive digital footprints

These kids need to establish a positive digital footprint. Without question, it will be the norm for these students to be Googled when they begin to seek employment. Even employment of the part time variety! They need to cultivate their personal brand, and we can help them by encouraging them to post about the great things they are involved in at school. This can reflect what they are learning in their classrooms, or it can be a discussion of the co-curricular activities they enjoy. We want our students to understand that they can control the message about them that exists on the Web, and they can point prospective employers, colleagues or university admissions officers towards a digital footprint that they themselves have created when the time is right.

2. Communicating with digital tools

We want our students to have a handle on how you use digital tools for communication purposes, and not just through networks like Facebook. Plenty of our students are Facebook users, but there is a higher order skill set required to maintain consistent posts in a blog. We've taught our students how to set up categories, add widgets, use the HTML editor to embed code, and even how to tell the difference between a legitimate comment and someone who is spamming you. As our world moves ever more closely towards the Internet as the main vehicle for communication, we feel that we are helping our students understand the language they will need to navigate this new territory.

3. Transparency for parents and family

Our curriculum is becoming more transparent for our parent population. As our students write more and more about their learning, we now have a means for our parents to feel more connected to what happens at school. Where once a child would write for an audience of one – their teacher – now they are writing for a potentially much larger audience that includes their immediate and extended family. When you see a grandparent leave a comment on a child's blog, it brings a bit of a tear to one's eye!

Just think, these students will have a digital archive of their learning, but not only that, they will have comments from friends and family members that they can revisit in years to come. Their access won't be limited to the box of cherished school records and momentos at the top of the bedroom cupboard. For these kids, an internet connection will enable them to pull up their account from anywhere and revisit their childhood and adolescent school years.

4. New ways of thinking about Web tools

We need a digital space to demonstrate new methods of learning using Web tools. Already this year, our student ePortfolios have been used to embed Slideshare and Google Docs presentations, Glogsters, podcasts created with Garageband, Google MyMaps, Prezi's and links to Wiki pages they have edited for differing subject areas. Just having our students understand how to hyperlink to other people's content, and the potential this opens for two-way conversation, has been eye opening for them. These spaces have helped provide even more reasons for our teaching staff to utilize Web based tools and teach themselves new skills in the process.

5. Effective digital citizenship

The ePortfolios support our commitment to assist our students with the skills they need for effective digital citizenship. We are having the conversations we need to have about how you conduct yourself in digital spaces in the context of our curriculum, and not in isolated lecture style presentations that may hit a chord with some students, but miss the mark with others. When I talk to my 7th grade students, they can clearly articulate why it is we are using these ePortfolios. It makes sense to them, and they know it is important for their future

lives. Believe you me, when a student tells you they need a really good digital footprint, it makes you feel like you've earned your keep that week!

Amazing or what?

I know I said I'd give you 5 reasons, but I can't resist adding a very important 6th. For many of our students, their world view is changing as a result of posting in public spaces. Many of them have embedded [Clustr](#) maps into their sidebars, and they can see where people are visiting from. Recently, [one of our year seven students](#) posted about the effect this global audience has had on her.

“

Okay- so this is amazing.

I've used this blog since March 30th and so far it's been a great resource and an amazing display of some of my work this year. It hasn't just been my teachers, my classmates, my family and I that have looked at it- as of August 6 my blog has had 533 visits worldwide.

Amazing or what? WOW.

”

Wow indeed.

//Selected Comments

Sharon K.

Thanks for your insights. I was particularly interested in your point about leaving a positive digital footprint. I will certainly be sharing this with my own children, too! The notion of e-portfolios has been questioned at our school in the past (e.g., lots of work for little purpose, etc.). I like how your students blog their learning publicly -- it creates such a broader audience (as the lovely comment at the end mentioned). We are just getting into blogging at our primary school and I'll use your insights to validate the purpose.

Jenny Luca

Thanks Sharon. I speak with parents regularly as they visit our school, and many of them are in agreement that it is important to impart to our children the need for a positive digital footprint. It's certainly a message I share with my own children too.

Jerrid K.

What happens when these digital tools no longer matter? I hope at least part of your rationale is improving students' ability to learn, their critical & reflective thinking skills & maybe even improve their crap detection.

Maybe this is part of your rationale, but it's interesting these (more important, IMO) factors were only implicit in your writing.

Jenny Luca

Thanks for the pushback, Jerrid. Our blog platform is only one part of our school's information fluency initiative we have introduced to ensure our students have the critical and reflective thinking skills they need to operate effectively in today's world. As a Teacher-Librarian, I am actively working in classrooms to ensure their skill set is broad and helps them to source the best resources and identify when they are dealing with 'crap' online. We have been more than impressed with the ability of some of our students to reflect quite deeply on their learning experiences and document this through the blog platform.

Maureen S.

Our school is beginning this blogging journey for the same reasons. Thanks for the post!

Landon O.

Thanks for an excellent post! My school is beginning to develop online portfolios this year. Several teachers in our school are starting to become excited about using blogs for their students. Digital citizenship and responsibility is such an important skill that our students MUST understand!

Britt G.

Thank you for your interesting discussion about the goals and benefits of student blogging. I agree that positive digital footprints, good communication skills and transparency are important issues in 21st century learning environments. Congratulations on your proactive approach.

About the Author



Jenny Luca is a Teacher-Librarian from Melbourne, Australia who is passionate about exploring the potential of new technologies in educational settings. She writes the blog [Lucaccept - Intercepting the Web](#) and has presented at conferences in Australia and internationally. Follow Jenny on Twitter @jennyluca.

READY FOR THE POWER SURGE

How We're Cultivating Inventive Thinkers in the Middle Grades

Self-Assessment in Grade One: "I Want to Be Excellent"

Teaching by Getting Out of the Way

What Do We Mean by "Authentic Learning?"

I'm a Connected Teacher, But at What Price?

How We're Cultivating Inventive Thinkers in the Middle Grades

Chris Preston

Can middle school students inventively think? As part of a [Powerful Learning Practice](#) (PLP) team, I joined four of my school colleagues this past year on a journey to figure out the answer to that question. What we found humbled us. Not only are middle school students capable of inventively thinking, but some of our teaching practices actually hinder students who might otherwise push the limits of their own inventiveness.

Middle school students view inventive thinking as “smart,” “new,” “creative” and “out-of-the-box.” When asked what “out-of-the-box” means, students told one of our team members: “You are the box. This classroom is the box. This textbook is the box. A rubric is the box.” When students work with rubrics, they said, “we have everything we need for an A after the first day or two. What next? We aren’t really inspired to push ourselves because we don’t have to.”

OK. So, as teachers, what should be our reaction? Our PLP team, which consisted of five teachers of three separate subjects from five different interdisciplinary teams, needed time to process what we were learning about student perceptions. We fumbled through some conversations about the meaning of inventive thinking and how we might make it happen in our classrooms.

Some of us, through opportunities offered by [High AIMS](#) and the Forest Hills School District, had been trained to use the framework of [Problem Based Learning](#) (PBL) in our classrooms. We designed units of instruction that (we hoped) focused on the 21st century skill of inventive thinking for all learners. We delivered instruction, gathered video evidence from our classrooms, and collected student survey responses throughout the year.

The results were interesting. We began to coalesce around several unifying ideas.

Unifying Idea #1: Authentic Tasks

Whether it was using modern-day technologies in a Social Studies classroom to solve problems in ancient Rome or creating an interactive exhibit in Science class for a local Children’s Museum, each of the units we designed had a unique authentic task embedded into the design. Students were motivated not only by the grade or grades they would receive but also the understanding that they were grappling with authentic problems and someone was listening to their ideas:

“

I was most passionate about the Roman Time Machine because of the trust you had in us to choose our own experts and style of project,” one student said. “This really showed me all the resources that are available and allowed us to branch out.

”

The units were not perfect, but we did upset the routine in our classrooms. We put windows in “the box,” allowing students to see through our structure to a world they were being invited to design and create. At the conclusion of our instruction many students commented that they would approach solutions to questions much differently in the future: “It changed how I look at projects,” one said, “by really opening up my surroundings to more insightful sources of information, and not focusing just on knowledge I can find here at school.”

Unifying Idea #2: Connected Learning

As the result of our second unifying idea — Connected Learning — students came to realize that there are people in the world who are interested in what young people think and can help students understand information they’re interested in.

We pushed students to develop questions associated with tasks within the units. We made it mandatory for each student to make one contact outside of our building. The contact could be through an e-mail, a phone call, an IM chat session, a video Skype session, or through the use of other 21st century tools. The contact also needed to provide useful information:

contacting the U.S. President is noble but might not yield anything. Contacting a local business owner, university professor, governmental leader, physician, or meteorologist might be more appropriate.

Students were amazed that they were allowed to send and receive e-mails during class to someone who could help them with their ideas. Social communication, to them, was something to be used outside of school, not as a classroom tool for learning. How many teachers would consider letting a student use his/her cell phone during class to join a conference call with a journalism team from a major regional newspaper? Before this year we might not have designed experiences that required such authentic connections to be made.

Unifying Idea #3: Collaborative Learning

We had the misconception that collaboration meant students working in groups, dividing and conquering bulleted lists from a teacher-generated rubric. Although collaboration can happen within the classroom in student groups using a teacher-generated rubric, what we discovered was different and more profound.

Collaboration can have two parts. During the first part students develop their own individual ideas pertaining to an authentic task — ideas rooted in reason and logic. The collaborative piece is students asking each other rigorous questions: *Why are we designing our solution this way? Why did we choose this person to contact? Students commented repeatedly about the opportunity to work with students from other classes and, in some cases, other teams in our school. “We were able to get with other people that were in other classes, we got to make our own decisions on what we wanted for the project and what style of project we wanted to do, and lastly we had to get it done by ourselves.”*

We found that the job of the teacher in these classrooms shifted from the main giver of knowledge to someone who coaches students toward solving an authentic problem while helping them connect content along the way.

We’ve been asked, “What next?” We feel as if our work to understand teaching in the 21st century has just begun.

Addressing the skills and tools to equip students for the invention of new ideas and products in a constantly changing society and economy will be a battle that should continue to engage teachers and schools for years, if not decades, to come.

[Find out more](#) about the Nagel Middle School project (and watch a video clip) at the Action Research area of the Powerful Learning Practice website.

//Selected Comments

Mark M.

Chris – our middle school is in the process of redesigning all our curricula to reflect Project Based Learning. I worked closely with our 6th grade social studies teachers this year to embed more opportunities for students to engage in authentic work and the results were astonishing: iMovie presentations to the Smithsonian Board of Directors recommending 19th century inventors to the “Smithsonian Invention Hall of Fame” – just to name one.

Chris Preston

Excellent, Mark. Many of the comments I’ve received from teachers are centered around the following: “I want to do more of problem/passion/project-based learning in my classroom, but the pacing guides and weekly data I have to turn into my administrator prevent me from feeling like I have freedom.” This is the reality. I think the trick might be to consistently figure out ways, through teacher-to-teacher conversations, to develop inventive thinking in students while operating in the “reality.” It sounds like your school/district is well on its way to making that happen.

Margaret H.

Did the kids decide how their work was to be assessed?

Chris Preston

The short answer about students being a part of the assessment process is “yes.” After the students commented about rubrics our team re-thought how we might typically approach assigning a grade to work and products. We found that building in formative assessments throughout the units helped us and the students stay on track. In other words, it was a problem if we got to the end of the unit of instruction and were discovering, for the first time, that a student was earning an “F” for a grade.

I will say that connecting grade-specific content to the authentic tasks is challenging and requires some thought and work in the classroom. We found that inviting students to apply their experiences to standardized test questions aligned with the content associated with the tasks was beneficial. Conversations about “right” and “wrong” answers became spirited. Through those classroom conversations we began to connect the content to the task.

About the Author



Chris Preston is a 7th grade science teacher at Nagel Middle School in Cincinnati’s Forest Hills Local School District. He enjoys “challenging myself, colleagues, and my students to push the boundaries of teaching and learning.” Chris has presented at regional and national middle-level conferences and has co-authored a professional journal article. You’ll find him on Twitter @cprestonrunning.

Self-Assessment in Grade One: “I Want to Be Excellent.”

Kathy Cassidy

I’ve thought for many years that it was a good idea to have first grade students self-assess and get involved in their own evaluation. We start most classes by discussing what the students will be learning in that time period. We pause at the end (and sometimes in the middle) of lessons to do a quick self-reflection of either their understanding or their work habits. (We put our fist on our hearts with our thumb either up or down.) I’ve had students colour in happy or sad faces to indicate how well they think they have learned a skill. I’ve been on board!

I’ve also nodded sagely as people discussed whether students should help create their own assessment rubric. Of course they should. Why doesn’t everyone do this, I wondered? It just never occurred to me to do it in MY classroom. Having students actually create their assessment tool was just not something I did. It wasn’t that I didn’t think my students could do it. I somehow didn’t get my thinking from the “should” to the “I’m doing it.”

Until this week. This week I asked the students to help me build the rubric we would use to evaluate their projects.

Building the Rubric

We were just coming to the end of a section of learning about our heart, lungs and brain. My Canadian school division has four levels of achievement, based on our provincial curriculum—Limited, Adequate, Proficient and Excellent. Those were a given. Together (with a significant amount of input from me—I hope this will get easier next time) we decided that their projects should include three things: illustrations, information about each body part, and information about how to keep these body parts healthy.

I showed this to my students and talked about what the four descriptors at the top meant. They all wanted to be excellent. (Don't we all?) What did they think would be excellent? Proficient? Together, we filled in the boxes of the rubric.

Showing the Learning

Next, we talked about ways they COULD show me what they had learned. The options they thought of included making a video, making a screencast, drawing a digital picture and using Audioboo. I introduced one more way of showing their learning that they had not yet tried. A good old-fashioned poster.

Perhaps because of the novelty or perhaps because of the variety of colours the posterboard came in, the poster proved to be the most popular choice by far.

It was interesting to observe the students as they were working on their project. Some clearly still had that "Excellent" in their head as they worked to meet the standards we had set. Another child said, "No, I'm good with the other one" and finished his project early.

The last student, who was struggling to finish her poster, paused in her work to look up at me. "Are you finished?" I asked. She looked at the rubric on the whiteboard. "Right now your poster would be here—adequate," I told her.

"No", she said, "I want to be excellent." So we sat down together to make it so.

It doesn't get better than that.

//Selected Comments

Jessica D.

Moving from the 'should' to the 'I'm doing it' is a hurdle (for a number of reasons – time, effort, etc.), but one that great teachers leap regularly. Thank you for sharing your leap. What you've outlined above seems possible – I can do that too!

Ryan S.

It looks like your students really care about their learning! Great job for them.

Kathy Cassidy

That is the key, isn't it? To have students care about their learning and to want to learn. That concept is what attracted me to PBL in the first place. Our primary students can do it!

About the Author



Kathy Cassidy is an award-winning first grade teacher who incorporates technology into her classroom to give her students an authentic audience and a portal to the world. She shares her classroom happenings in [several online spaces](#). Her [classroom blog](#) features many stories and images of her young students doing their 21st century work.

Teaching by Getting Out of the Way

Marsha Ratzel

The atmosphere felt very different in my classroom a few weeks ago, as I began the hard work of teaching by getting out of the way.

I've always done inquiry science, but it has been more teacher-directed than I wanted. Over the summer I took an e-course in "[Unleashing Student Passion](#)" hoping to find a better approach. Isn't that what summers are for? It's the best time [to look back](#) at what worked well and what you could improve. In the summer of 2011, I went in search of ideas on how to develop more independent and critical thinkers.

The [e-course](#), led by [Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach](#) (@snbeach), was challenging for me because it exposed so many places where I want to be better. And not just a little better. A whole lot better.

Unleashing student passion for learning and specifically for science was my targeted area for improvement. I needed to stop holding students back from becoming the learners they will need to be as they grow up. I have always helped students learn the science and be curious. But I knew it was time to take another step, to help the kids in my classroom kindle their own passion for learning and become self-starting.

As school resumed in late August, I took the plunge and began implementing what I'd been studying all summer. It was hard. I wanted to roam the aisles looking for kids who needed help and encouragement. Instead (with some effort) I chose to sit back and let them do all that for themselves, using the skills we had been talking about over several weeks — how to define and build a team and be a good communicator.

We've begun to practice those new learning skills by making observations and doing data collection. Big yawn? Not the way we're doing it. I decided this would be the perfect work setting to test out some of the ideas Sheryl's been teaching. Besides,

we've spent hours talking about teamwork and defining what it takes to be a good teammate and communicating clearly. We've practiced body language and put on demonstrations of how we listen to each other. So it was time for me to step back, hold my breath a little, and watch these kids put all they've been learning into action.

And away we go

While I've done inquiry-based lessons before, this time I really, really let go. I helped them with some set-up, gave them the minimum background knowledge, and then cut the strings. I left it to the student teams to pose questions that might interest them.

I also purposefully let them do it without me hovering. I told them I was strictly an observer today. I tried to empower them by not just telling but showing them that I trusted them to do the work. Although it was hard, I stayed at my desk, never strolled the aisles, asking questions or answering questions. I sat there intently concentrating on what they were doing and how they were interacting with each other.

Being present without being there

They knew I was present. That's been a big point of the learning I've done this summer. I was there, watching without being depended on. Does that make any sense?

By the end of the period, I think they were shocked at how well they were capable of managing their own learning. And it was a revelation to me. I gained so much insight into what my students, individually and collectively, were capable of doing. I was able to spend almost the entire 45 minutes making observational notes: who were the leaders, who struggled, how they worked with their partner.

I ended up with an enormous new cache of information about each of them that I can use for lesson planning. This valuable data will be the basis for the next lesson I teach. I have to give many thanks to the “wayfinding” teachers who encouraged and supported me to try this. Thanks, [Lani Ritter Hall](#) and [Dean Shareski](#)—for showing me this lesson. I still have a long way to go but I think I'm getting it.

Pennies for thinking

How, you might wonder, do I know they got anything out of the experience? By the questions they asked. Turned loose from teacher expectations, they investigated their own questions and then started exploring other things that were of interest to them. Here's some of how it went.

We started with a typical observation/data collection activity: dropping water on a penny and counting the drops.

They posed questions that we captured via Twitter —

How many drops will a penny hold? How tall is a penny with the max amount of water on it?

less than a minute ago via web

ratzel66
Ratzel Room66

they started asking better and better questions....

How tall is the dome after you've maxed it out? What's the difference in # of drops if you drop it from the air vs touching the penny? How many times?

less than a minute ago via web

ratzel66
Ratzel Room66

How wide does a penny get when you put water on it? How many drops does it take to get the water bubble to hang over the edge of a penny?

less than a minute ago via web

ratzel66

Ratzel Room66

They worked and worked at all these questions, some of which I was very dubious about when they proposed them. I'll admit that some questions worked out and others ran into the troubles that I would have predicted. But here's the big ah-ha: they've learned it for themselves now. It wasn't the teacher telling them "no" and here's why. Instead, they tried it, it didn't work, they re-grouped and formulated another question to test. It wasn't a big deal. It became routine scientific investigation, rudimentary though it certainly was.

I'm hoping this experience builds up their learning muscles so when we get to bigger topics they'll feel the same way about roadblocks they encounter. Those roadblocks will be higher and wider, but maybe they'll remember the value of persistence, something they've now had a taste of — dripping water onto pennies. Beginning steps. Simple activity. Experience gathered under our belts.

**Unexpected pleasures
are usually the best ones**

My biggest joy today came from one of those goofy boy groups — the guys you love and who stress you out all at the same time. They finished and sat there just seeing what would happen if.... They mostly made a mess until they

discovered you could get a drop of water to "stick" to the penny

...even if you turned it upside down

We put one drop on a penny and held it and then flipped it.

less than a minute ago via web

ratzel66

Ratzel Room66

Then everyone had to try and replicate the results. With that accomplished, they starting firing off amazing questions. It was contagious. Success was breeding success everywhere in our classroom that hour. They measured the bulge of the water bubble over the side of the penny, concocting amazing ways of using rulers. They conferred and shared and suggested alternative ways of doing everything. And all the while they were engaged.

I wish you could have seen their faces beaming and shouting across the room. “Hey Mrs. R, look at this!” Jumping to the next thing and then the next. I sent a big air high five across the room to congratulate them. These were their questions, their experiments and they owned it. Big time.

And it all happened because I got out of their way — and let them struggle a bit — so they could find their passion for learning science.

//Selected Comments

Patti G.

Marsha, this was so exciting to read! Building their “learning muscles” and learning how to work through roadblocks is HUGE. It’s amazing that left to their own devices (without being able to lean on you), how successful they were and how they were able to follow their own curiosity and construct their own learning. Simply fantastic. I really want to flip a penny with a drop of water on it now. Thanks so much for sharing this story.

Bill F.

Awesome bit, Marsha. You’ve challenged me to do more getting out of the way. That’s hard for me simply because I’ve always been the assertive leader type of teacher guy.

Now, I'll be honest: What I'm most afraid of isn't whether my kids can guide their own learning in meaningful ways. I'm most afraid of how much more time these kinds of activities will take and how much more trouble I'll get in for falling off the county pacing guide.

I shouldn't care about that simply because I know that the lessons learned are so much more important than anything covered in standardized tests, but the fact of the matter is that I do care. Any of this make sense?

Marsha Ratzel

Oh Bill, I totally understand the fear of not knowing if kids can guide their own learning. But then I asked myself this question: How will they ever learn? How will they ever get better? If I never let go and let them try.

I think my key was realizing that I had to tell them that it would be hard and that it would feel a little uncomfortable. and that we'd figure it out as we go along. That I would need their consultation and honesty, so we could figure it out together.

It forced me to build in even more feedback moments than normal. That was a biggie. I had formative assessments built into my teaching plan already, but I had to morph the formatives to include loads more meta-cognitive stuff than I had designed. Before, my formatives were all focused on learning targets. Now they had to expand to include time management and organization and teamwork and...?

As for falling off the pacing guide: Well, I think there's room in any pacing guide. That's because I think many of them spend way too much time worrying about the bottom end of Bloom's. If we can learn the boring stuff faster, I can make time for inquiry. My hypothesis has been that I can transfer all that drill/practice time into higher level skills time, which would be OK because the "missed" time would be embedded in the higher skills time.

Does that make sense? I swapped it believing if I taught for the deeper learning, the lower level learning that I gave up would be taken care of. I finished my scientific inquiry unit at the same time as other teachers; we just weighted our time in the unit differently. So far I think my hypothesis is holding up.

I totally understand the hesitation that kids won't know how to do this kind of learning. Why would they? It's not how they've been doing it. But if not now,

then when? How long can we continue to wait, until we have waited too long to build them up into strong independent thinkers?

And we'll have to do it together. They'll have to teach me what they can do -- I'll have to respond -- design new lessons/interventions -- and then move forward. I believe in them and their abilities to adapt and expand their capabilities.

Denise K.

Thanks for an excellent post. I teach science to 7th graders, too, and you hooked me in the first paragraphs. I would love to get my students more independent and thinking critically. I long for them to care about science. Thanks for sharing this. I will be reading more from you and others.

Marsha Ratzel

Denise, I think helping students become more independent is a critical piece we've been overlooking. Sometimes I wonder if we don't resemble "helicopter teachers" a little more than we would like to admit.

I think the trick is finding that balance. I don't want anyone to become so frustrated that they want to quit. But I don't want anyone to be so dependent that they can't find their own creativity and abilities and learning path. I guess it's where I see the masterful blend of teaching come into play...and that definitely takes a lifetime to learn how to do well. Let's stay in touch and help each other.

About the Author



Marsha Ratzel is a National Board-certified teacher in the Blue Valley School District in Kansas, where she teaches middle school math, science, and sometimes social studies. She's also a Connected Coach in the Powerful Learning Practice communities and a charter member of the Teacher Leaders Network. She writes often about her teaching practice in national publications and at [Reflections of a Techie](#).

What Do We Mean by “Authentic Learning?”

Lyn Hilt

It’s action research time for my [Professional Learning Practice](#) cohort, and through our project design we hope to engage our students in relevant, connected, and authentic learning experiences. After presenting the specifics of our project ideas to the cohort, the always-supportive [Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach](#) offered constructive criticism and ideas for refinement, and perhaps most importantly, she asked us to define authentic learning.

What is authentic learning? After discussing this topic for only a few moments, it became uncomfortably obvious for my teammates and me, although able to compile several ideas and examples of what may be authentic learning, that deriving a definition of authentic learning was proving to be tricky business. Like I often do, I decided to enlist the help of my Twitter friends.

@L_Hilt I’d say “authentic learning” is the acquisition of new knowledge or skills that can be used for the benefit of a learner or society.

less than a minute ago via TweetDeck

AndersonGL
AndersonGL

@L_Hilt I think all learning is “authentic.” I’m not so sure if all learning is particularly meaningful, relevant or necessary.

less than a minute ago via TweetDeck

karltisch
karltisch



As a principal I appreciate Gary Anderson’s point that authentic learning can be used to benefit the learner and society, thus the learning contributes to a collective body of knowledge that is greater than ourselves. If, as Karl Fisch shared, all learning is authentic, how do we ensure the learning happening within our school walls is meaningful? Relevant? Necessary? I am not entirely sure pinpointing a definition for authentic learning (or [learning itself](#), for that matter) is as important as developing an awareness for what engaging learning looks, sounds, and feels like. Learning is personal, yes, but what are the identifiable qualities of authenticity in stimulating learning environments?

Learning goes deep

Students pull from their own background experiences and knowledge to reflect upon new concepts and ideas, construct explanations, and consider alternative perspectives to concepts and ideas. Students immerse themselves in “big picture” ideas and [delve into complexities](#) of content (goodbye, fly-by-mile-wide-inch-deep-curriculum). We integrate curricular strands and allow students to experience thematic impacts. The bar is raised, and students are expected to reach that bar and extend beyond.

Evidence of higher order thinking

Students pose and solve complex problems. I love the use of “provocations” to engage students in high levels of thinking. In her post [Today we will be learning about...](#), Edna Sackson describes how her students interpret, evaluate, and create. Students make mistakes, yet they channel frustrations into re-examination of ideas and processes to promote a different outcome. Students use a critical eye to investigate subject matter. They question everything, and when they find answers, they pose additional questions. The thirst for learning is insatiable!

Real and substantive conversations

Students talk: to the teacher, to each other. The learning environment encourages and nurtures the open sharing of ideas. Students converse through a variety of media as part of the reflective process. They create and [share with authentic audiences](#). Students make distinctions, form generalizations, and dialogue with elaboration. If you’ve never taken a step back, found an inconspicuous part of the room, and just sat and listened to students engaged in a conversation, do it. Like, tomorrow. They will astound you.

Personal learning

Students' past, present, and future experiences are explored and valued. Opportunities exist for students to research, plan, and create projects, the subjects of which inspire and delight students. Students connect with others who share their passions and collaborate with them for a greater purpose. We [encourage students to find](#) that which makes their heart sing. They have [choices](#) to do so! This month, one of my fourth grade classes decided they wanted to change the world. They [designed a project](#) to help raise money for the victims of Japan's natural disasters. Thus far, they've raised over \$600 for the relief efforts by selling beaded pins for \$1 each! The students set a goal of \$50 before the project began... and they've simply been overwhelmed with excitement by the project's impact. Our school community, in turn, has swelled with pride at how this class has fulfilled their passions.

Autonomy, mastery, purpose, choice, self-direction

Instructional strategies vary and are personalized for individual learners. We create a multitude of opportunities for students to work both independently and in small groups. Students prioritize, plan, and manage their learning to accomplish goals. Students have freedoms — the freedom to choose tasks, techniques, and teams for learning. When I walk into a classroom where the students own the learning, I see a teacher on the sidelines. A teacher who is guiding, facilitating, and supporting.

21st century skills integration

Shelley Wright describes what [21st century learning looks like](#). Students know how to use technology effectively, efficiently, and with a purpose. Students find and evaluate credible information. Tools are used to communicate, collaborate, and create with others. Students and teachers are skilled communicators who respectfully challenge each other's thinking.

Everyone is reflecting, all of the time

Teachers and students capitalize on unexpected events and ambiguities in learning, and use these events as opportunities for extending and refining thinking. Teacher and peer feedback is evident. Self-evaluation is encouraged and expected! Last week I observed two fourth graders discuss their strategies for solving a math problem with some new content. The first student looked at his peer and said, "I'm just going to come right out and say that I guessed! I just totally guessed!" The

beauty of his honest response was that his partner then clearly articulated his own steps, guided his partner in examining his work, and actually, both of them left the conversation with a rather strong understanding of the meaning of the problem and what was necessary to solve it.

Administrators, what do you look for when you spend time in classrooms? What do you listen for? Teachers, how do you know authentic, real, meaningful, passion-filled learning is happening before your eyes? How often do we take the time to ask *children* what learning means to *them*?

I chose [this image](#) above to accompany this post because, no matter how many of the above characteristics we see in our classrooms, **that face is the one I most want to see**. Every visit, every time.

//Selected Comments

Sue S.

You hit the nail on the head, Lyn! And so did your twitter friends. 21st century skills ARE authentic learning opportunities. When children reflect on the PROCESS of learning (whether they guess or not) and the way they may apply their learning to the real world – they grow. Thank you for reminding us where our focus must be in schools!

Tish H.

Reflective practice can be taught to every child. Even with the mundane, mandated state testing that we have in Virginia, the students in our school are being encouraged to utilize best effort strategies to explain every multiple choice they make. In this way, we infuse into an assessment that does not in any way foster higher level thinking skills a slice of what we educators call good practice!

Shelley W.

I would love for all teachers, administrators and those trying to “change” education to read this post. Authentic learning isn’t something that is

programmed. It seems much more organic and unpredictable. And it's one of those things, as a teacher, where you create the conditions, and then get out of the way. I would love for our classrooms, and our curriculum to be centered around these concepts beginning in preschool!

About the Author



Lyn Hilt is an elementary school principal and technology integrator. She believes in learner-centered, passion-driven educational experiences and seeks to model for her students and staff the power of connected learning. Her thoughts on learning can be found on [The Principal's Posts](#) and [Connected Principals](#). She lives in Pennsylvania, has enjoyed many world travels, and encourages everyone to adopt a greyhound or two. Follow Lyn on Twitter at @L_Hilt.

I'm a Connected Teacher, But at What Price?

Jenny Luca

Recently I went to a free screening of [*Connected, An Autobiography about Love, Death & Technology*](#). The film's creator is Tiffany Shlaine, and she is someone well versed in the workings of the web. Tiffany founded the Webby awards fifteen years ago, but today concentrates her efforts on film-making. Interestingly, for me anyway, her film echoed a lot of my thinking about the nature of being connected.

I've mentioned, more than a few times, the transformational effect that being connected has had on my life. There is little doubt in my mind that I am richer for it, in a soulful sense. I feel energised when I'm learning new things from all the network nodes I'm connected to. I know how easy it is to lose yourself in the Twitter stream, but also how enriched you can feel when your brain is firing and possibilities are stretching out before you.

What comes with this is the desire to stay on top of things, to be ahead of change. You quickly realise this is impossible, that you would need to be looking at a device 24/7 and even then you wouldn't have a hope of covering everything that is happening.

Tiffany begins the film with an anecdote, featured at the beginning of this trailer. She describes the revelatory moment when she wondered: *What have I become?*

Hey, I've been there. Some would say I've never left that state. But I know better. In my early days of immersion, I'd sit among friends in conversation and find my mind wandering. The desire to switch on my phone and check my networks was intense, almost like a primal need. I found myself connected to the network, and disconnected from long term friends, even family. It seemed that they didn't understand, they weren't part of what was in my immediate field of interest. None of them grasped the magnitude of my new discovery.

In that state, I longed for opportunities to find real time face to face meet ups with the people in my network, and I thought I would find myself content in their presence. While that was true with some people, what I also discovered was that many of the people I met were distant, introspective, or even people who just weren't all that friendly face to face. What is obvious to me now but wasn't then is that my network mirrored real life. It is a human network, populated with all variants of the human condition.

This year, I have been conflicted. I made a conscious decision to back off with my immersion. I still truly value my network, and continue to find it the place where I am energised and excited about possibilities. But what I have found is that I have reconnected with those in my immediate sphere, my close friends and family. I value the time I spend with them, and remain present for longer periods than I did in the past. The sky hasn't fallen, my connection with an already established network is still strong, and I feel more at peace with my world. (A world that recently extended to Italy, where I traveled with some of my students!)

Like Tiffany's tale, it was a watershed moment that led to me resetting priorities. When you face adversity, true friends and connections come to the fore, and some leave you hanging. I am so grateful to my immediate close friends and family who rallied and made sure my family and I were OK. The same can be said of true friends in my network, people who have taken time to look beneath the surface and see what lies there.

Although I can say I am more at peace with myself, I remain conflicted to some degree about backing off the network. I haven't put my hand up this year to present at conferences, and I have to admit to feeling a degree of performance anxiety when I see others pushing themselves out there. It is my dream to live this work, to find a way to do it all the time, not just part of my time.

So I will remain connected, and to some extent, conflicted. But I will do so knowing that it is not at the expense of the relationships that matter most.

//Selected Comments

Becky B.

Jenny, I wrote about the exact same thoughts on my blog just the other day. When is it just too much technology? It is a fine balance between being present in the moment in our face-to-face relationships and working, learning and laughing with our online friends. I'm still working on figuring out that balance, and it's nice to know that I'm not alone with my wonderings about being too connected.

Jenny Luca

It's a fine balance indeed, Becky, and one that I think will be discussed ever more frequently as we see more of our lives move into digital spaces. My balancing act continues, as does yours, and no doubt plenty of others are trying to negotiate what works best for them. I think there are some indicators telling me that I am getting better at striking the right balance. The fact that I didn't check the site stats on my blog for a few days in a row was one of them. Miraculous indeed.

Patti G.

I think we've all been there. I'm still there, I'm afraid, spending WAY too much time at the computer. Twitter, Google+, my Google Reader, and now even Pinterest provide great ideas and resources. I just spent Saturday at a professional development "unconference" in Virginia. It was wonderful, but I missed some things happening at home. The only thing I can think to do is to enforce a time limit!

I still look at folks who seem to always be on Twitter when I am, and are always doing, presenting, sharing. I can't keep up – and I think it's wrong to try. Everyone has to engage at the level that works best for them. Jenny, it sounds like you are getting there, and I respect you for working at it. Thanks for sharing!

Jenny Luca

Hi Patti. Your recount rings true for me. That was what I was like. Always on, always looking for an opportunity to push my ideas out there. Like I said above, pulling back has made me feel more at peace, and that is so important. If I'm offline for a few days I don't stress. The network doesn't disappear, and if something big happens, it'll still be there when I return. It takes time to discover what works best for you. Good luck with it, to all of us!

About the Author



Jenny Luca is a Teacher-Librarian from Melbourne, Australia who is passionate about exploring the potential of new technologies in educational settings. She writes the blog [Lucept - Intercepting the Web](#) and has presented at conferences in Australia and internationally. Follow Jenny on Twitter @jennyluca.

AFTERWORD:

EXTRA

ENERGY

Passion-Based Learning for the 21st Century

An Interview with Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach

Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach, a former classroom teacher and school administrator, is a widely known speaker and trainer on the use of interactive technology in K-12 education. She is the co-founder (with Will Richardson) of [Powerful Learning Practice](#), a professional development provider oriented around digital networks, and the co-author of the 2012 book [The Connected Educator](#) (Solution Tree).

In this Education Week Teacher interview, Sheryl described the transformation she believes must take place in teaching and learning practices if elementary and secondary schools are to remain relevant in an era when information and communication technologies will continue to expand exponentially.

Help us understand the shift you say must take place in teaching.

Well, we live in a connected world, with the Internet and powerful digital technologies literally at our fingertips, so it would be foolish not to integrate those things into the learning experience. But when I talk about the shift to 21st-century teaching and learning, I am not talking primarily about changing the tools we use. I'm talking about transforming the way most teachers teach today—either because they were taught to teach that way or because the accountability system makes them believe they have to teach that way.

Instead of thinking that I am “The Teacher”—the knowledge-giver who stands up front in total control—instead of that traditional pedagogy, we need a 21st-century vision of teaching, where there is less teacher talk and more student talk, where what I'm doing is thinking about how I am going to pull the most out of these kids; how I'm going to enable these students to be empowered; how I can make sure that I create a classroom that's free from threat and stress, where they'll be willing to take risks.

Instead of me having all these preconceived ideas of what they should doing, saying, and producing, I have to be open to what I find in each student. I have to discover—and help each student discover—their talents and interests and create a learning environment where they can use those gifts and passions to learn from a position of strength.

But “passion” is not a word we’re used to hearing when we talk about the learning process in school.

I know passion-based learning may seem like a crazy kind of term. Some people hear it and think about learning that’s out of control— that it’s all about what students want to do and not about what they need to do. A lot of critics will say kids don’t even know what they want to do. They worry that we’re going to take learning and shortcut it to the point that people aren’t truly deep learners. That’s not what I’m advocating in any way, shape, or form.

But I think one of the things we’ve done is we’ve trained the passion out of our students from the 2nd grade up. I think kindergartners and 1st graders and some 2nd graders still have it, but after that, forget it. It’s gone. Another way you might want to describe it is a “sense of wonderment.” Really looking at the world with wonder and bringing a sense of wonder to certain things that we just want to learn everything about.

So I think passion is a great word, and it fits with the ideas that I’m trying to convey. If it causes people to step back and to think, either from a positive or a negative place, at least they’re thinking.

This personalization of learning—giving students more control—is frequently criticized as an abrogation of the teacher’s responsibility to direct the learning process.

What I'm envisioning is that I am still the teacher in the room—as the decision-maker, I am in control of the outcomes that I want to happen around core content or the affective domain. The difference is that I am going to allow these kids to pick and choose the areas they are most passionate about. I'm going to use an “appreciative” strategy that says students learn best when we have them work from their strengths to accomplish the outcomes, rather than having to work from their weaknesses. Which means that as a teacher, I'm going to have to be a master of the curriculum. I've got to know exactly what I want the end result to be in order to allow these kids to approach what we need to learn from their own passion or their own personal interest.

What does it mean to have students “work from their strengths”?

If we support teachers with the right working conditions, they will have the time to develop deeper relationships with their students. So, just like a parent, they will come to understand each student's strengths—what their interests are, but also how each of our students learns best. That's what I mean by “strengths.” Good teachers have always had this capacity, but we've stolen so much time away from them in our obsession to “cover the curriculum” that it can be much more difficult to accomplish. One of the chief ways teachers gain this insight is through ongoing informal classroom assessments. That kind of assessment also takes time and is more difficult to accomplish in the helter-skelter rush to “be accountable.”

Whenever you use a one-size-fits-all assessment or instructional approach, some people are going to be allowed to work through their strengths, and others are going to have to approach that objective through their weaknesses. The potential to have students work from their strengths really comes alive in the 21st century because new technologies and Web tools allow us to manage and express knowledge and information in many different ways. We find ourselves being able to work through

content, solve problems, and apply what we know using tools and approaches that favor our strengths, even if our strengths aren't well-suited to the old paradigms of schooling..

I was watching some video from British elementary schools recently. These are films promoting advanced teaching skills. In one clip, we see the teacher talking to her class about collaborating on a project. "Find the partner you need," she says. "Some of you are picture-smart or word-smart or number-smart. Help each other." She's focused on getting students to recognize their strengths and also collaborate so they can help each other become stronger in other "smart" dimensions too.

When you describe the passion-based approach in your conversations with teachers, what's the reaction?

A lot of teachers say, "Well, it's not going to work, because the students I have are just not self-directed. I have to tell them what to do and what to say and what to think." And that's true to a certain extent, because we've trained that into students. But with skillful teaching, we can un-train them.

Teachers who have made this breakthrough often talk about how risky it feels at first. But there is ample evidence out there that students can become confident learners again.

Can you give us an example of how you might teach using a passion-based approach?

Typically what I do is I try to construct my course or unit under some big umbrella that I already know is going to be very interesting to kids where they are right now in their development. So if I'm working with middle schoolers, then one unit I might do is around skateboarding. And so the first thing I do is I sit down and I think about the many aspects of skateboarding.

So I might come up with skateboarding parks; people who skateboard; marketing the designs, clothing, boards; maybe some of the laws that try to control skateboarding; the lifestyle that goes with skateboarding; the extreme versions of the sport; the physical attributes. So I'm kind of brainstorming. And when I look at my list, I pick something, say the laws, and I ask myself what typical kinds of content, coursework, fits with this—civics education, debate, history, etc.

Next what I do is actually align different threads of investigation with the standards. Then I go into the classroom with the kids and say, "OK, this is what we're going to learn about—we're going to think about skateboarding in all kinds of different ways. So let's brainstorm." I do a concept map with them, and then I look at the things they're most interested in.

There are going to be certain things that I will teach, because I know there will be state-mandated testing and I want to make sure they do well. So that will be a whole-group thing that I do in a more typical teaching style. But then there's going to be other pieces that they totally own.

**What if you're teaching history or literature?
Skateboarding is not going to be a workable umbrella there.**

In some instances, passion-based learning is letting kids come up with something they're really passionate about that can be related to the curriculum, and allowing them to work within that space. And in other instances, passion-based learning is finding out what the students are passionate about within a circumscribed field—within the specific elements of the curriculum that the state says we have to teach in such-and-such an area.

So when teachers say to me, "Oh, you don't understand high-stakes testing—I just can't do that right now," I say, "Oh, yes you can." It's not about ignoring the testing, the core curriculum, or the standards. It's about allowing them to pick an entry point they're really excited about.

If I'm teaching the Civil War, there might be some boys who are really into the gore of people getting wounded and the kind of medicine that was practiced on the battlefield and in the field hospitals—what happened with amputations and how they did that and so forth. That's not necessarily something that's going to be tested, but they can address the larger learning goals as they learn how their passionate interest relates to everything else going on in the Civil War. It's also interdisciplinary: there's the language use, the construction of sentences, the persuasive argument, the problem solving, the way they're going to share what they learn with the rest of the group, and what they themselves are going to learn from other kids' sharing their particular interests. It's all workable to meet curriculum objectives.

When I was leading a small school in Georgia where we used this teaching approach, our students had to perform well on the state accountability tests if we wanted to remain open. So we would devote three weeks or so before the test to look at what we were learning through more of a multiple-choice, facts-based kind of lens. Our kids did great on the tests and then we got back to the kind of teaching and learning we all loved.

If you were going to create an assessment system that really honored passion-based learning, what would it look like?

It has to be performance-based and competency-based. As teachers we have to realize that the outcome—the product that's the outcome of whatever we set up to be the objective of the learning—is the assessment. Instead of relying only on multiple-choice and paper-and-pencil tests, where everybody has to fit into the same box, we need to be able to do things like create portfolios. The digital and Web-based tools that we have today make electronic portfolios very easy. We can take different artifacts and things that kids are doing that prove mastery of the objectives and build a portfolio that displays and documents their learning.

Often what I do is bring students into that process. I say, “OK, this is the objective we’re trying to accomplish. What is the project that you’re going to choose that will show me at the end of our unit whether you have mastered it?” Even in elementary school we can get them to start thinking about that—what they could do, what they could produce that’s going to show me they learned the material and concepts they needed to learn.

Once the teacher matches the objective to the outcome, artifact, or product that you’re going to get—once you say, “OK, this is what’s going to prove mastery, this is how I can assess it”—then teachers really have some concrete pieces of work that they can analyze, work that students have helped select with the level of teacher guidance that’s appropriate for the age group and tasks involved.

I’m all for data-driven teaching and learning. Data can be hugely helpful to us, but it has to be data that tell us about the breadth and depth of what students are learning, in the context of what we want them to learn. In my example, I can decide I’m going to look at growth over time, analyze their electronic portfolios, and find the data I need to tell me whether and to what degree my strategies are working and what I need to do next.

Any final thoughts for teachers interested in exploring this approach?

When your teaching practice is passion-based, you’re working very hard as you backward-design lessons and assessments and personalize the educational experience for each child in your care. But here’s the thing: You’re doing what you really need to do to make sure nobody falls through the cracks, and you don’t one day sit back and look over your career and think, “Oh my gosh, there were all those kids that I didn’t prepare for this world that awaited them, and they’re not successful because I didn’t do what I needed to do.”



THE CONNECTED LEARNER EXPERIENCE

We want to take you from “What is 21st Century learning and why is it important?” to “How do I create a 21st Century classroom or school?”

When you join our **Connected Learner Experience**, you will actively participate in mind-shifting webinars, collaborate in a dynamic online community of fellow learners, and ultimately create a custom learning product that *you* design.

Teachers, principals and other educators emerge from our year-long **Connected Learner Experience** as classroom, school and system leaders who *get* SHIFT and who have an arsenal of inquiry-driven, technology-embedded, student-directed teaching and learning strategies.

To sum up, this unique program is:

- Ongoing, job-embedded professional development for 21st Century educators
- Built around social media and Web 2.0 tools
- Made up of intensive, organic, learner-directed, collaborative communities of practice and purposeful network connections
- Focused on leveraging emerging technologies as tools for deep learning and principled change
- Empirically-based and researched model of professional learning
- Ongoing, job-embedded professional development for 21st Century educators
- Built around social media and Web 2.0 tools
- Made up of intensive, organic, learner-directed, collaborative communities of practice and purposeful network connections
- Focused on leveraging emerging technologies as tools for deep learning and principled change
- Empirically-based and researched model of professional learning

What are the core experiences I'll be part of during the year?

- You'll participate in a vibrant community of practice where you learn from and share with fellow educators on the same journey — on a time schedule that best suits you.
- You'll explore 21st century teaching & learning environments first-hand.
- You'll probe the benefits and challenges of them shifted classroom as you experiment with research-based teaching strategies.
- You'll design and bring to fruition an action research or “legacy” project that has significant impact on your practice, your school, your leadership.
- You'll take part in two full-day, face-to-face conferences (locations and dates TBA). The first half of each day is packed with exciting topics in a TED-like presentation format. Then you'll join your colleagues for an afternoon of interactive workshops designed to both excite and prepare you for your year-long PLP experience.
- You'll collaborate with others through Web 2.0 tools like Twitter, Diigo and Delicious, Wikispaces, Elluminate, Ning and more You'll also explore other cutting-edge Web 2.0 tools along the way.
- You'll co-construct projects and activities related to our webinar content.
- You'll engage in guided practice, supported by case studies, videos, collegial discussions and practical examples.
- You'll tap into your own interests and passions as you pursue self-directed learning within our large global network: **The PLP Community Hub**.
- And you'll select from a menu of other learning options: Book studies with the author, lesson plan studies with practicing 21st century educators, virtual classroom/school visits, customized chats with experienced voices, and some chances to laugh together.

Individuals or school teams can participate in this powerful learning journey.

You are not alone

In this vibrant community of educators, you'll always be able to find a sounding board for ideas, a dose of shared courage when you need it, and lot of professional and personal friends who understand what you're doing, where the value is in our inevitable "fails", and how important it is to celebrate when it just works great! That is no small thing!

Who will help me on my journey?

- Thought leaders & seasoned 21st Century educators from around the world.
- PLP Community Leaders (who offer everyday help and keep the conversations going)
- PLP Connected Coaches (who guide & support PLPeeps as you learn tools, concepts, and work through your Legacy Project of action research)
- PLP Experienced Voices (who share their expertise in special community forums)
- Fellow PLPeeps – who share your learner's perspective and want to talk about it!

How will I be different at the end of this experience?

- You'll possess valuable new skills & knowledge that will benefit your students, school, and district
- You'll be a changed educator, wiser and more confident from taking principled risks.
- You'll be a full-fledged participant in the global community of educators leading the shift.
- For as long as you like, you'll be a member of our ongoing community of practice – the PLP Community Hub – where you'll always be able to find a sounding board for ideas, a dose of shared courage when you need it, and lot of professional and personal friends who understand what you're doing, where the value is in our inevitable "fails", and how important it is to celebrate when it just works great!

The Curriculum: Packed with 21st Century Skills

You'll get ten 90-minute, synchronous, online webinars including

- Setting the Stage: Teaching and Learning in the 21st Century
- Connected Learning Communities: Learning and Leading in an Online Community of Practice
- Network Literacy: Strategies for Creating Personal Learning Networks
- Becoming a Connected Educator
- Inquiry-based Learning: Who, What, When, Where, Why?
- Inquiry-based Learning: Using TPACK and Connected Learning as Curriculum Tools
- PBL: Getting Your Students from Start to Finish
- Authentic Assessment with Cutting-Edge Technology and Tools
- How to Learn Collaboratively Through Action Research and Collective Intelligence
- Your Legacy Project: Action Research Workshop

Your Team's Legacy Project

Through our coached process of action research, collaboratively you will select an issue, problem or possibility to address in your school or classroom. Then you and/or your team will develop a creative PD plan to share what you learned with the rest of your school or district. Connected Coaches will work with teams to enrich the action research experience.

Still have questions and want to talk ?

Thinking about joining but not sure which option is right for you? Have other questions or just want to chat with us live? Get your questions answered at one of our regular information sessions. Info sessions are one-hour live webinars, where you'll chat with our co-founders about our year-long, connected learner experience and other e-learning options. Find out more at plpnetwork.com/guided-tour.



eCourses 2012

For Educators

Our Powerful Learning eCourses are practical, affordable, and an easy way to get your professional development in from the comfort of your own home (or wherever your laptop and your imagination take you). **Graduate credit is available for all our instructor led eCourses.**

- Project Based Learning Immersion
- Engage with The Flipped Classroom: The Full Picture
- 21st Century-ize Your Curriculum
- Connective Writing
- Teaching Online: Becoming a connected educator
- Connected Coaching
- Leading Edge Boot Camp

Find out more at plpnetwork.com/ecourses.



We've taken over 4,000 educators through our Connected Learner Experience. They've transformed their teaching and learning with this unique, year-long PD opportunity that combines Web 2.0 tools with collaboration, networking, and online learning.

However, we know that a year is a huge commitment that not everyone can make. We've listened, and thanks to your suggestions we are now offering a new course: PLP Lite.

PLP Lite is a 12-week eCourse that will take you from "What is 21st Century learning and why is it important?" to "How do I create a 21st Century classroom or school?" If you joined us for Connected Educator Month, you're going to love this extended learning experience. Take what you learned during the month of August (2012) even further and learn how to bring Web 2.0 tools and connected learning into your classroom every day.

How is this course different from the year-long program?

- Shorter time commitment (12 weeks vs. 1 year)
- Less expensive
- Avoid the back-to-school rush
- Scheduled before the year-end testing crunch
- A more structured, course-like approach

This course starts January 2013. Get involved or find out more at plpnetwork.com/lite.