

New Leader

Practical strategies for student achievement



The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat

Principals Edition

'This Classroom Has No Walls' Global Connectivity for High Student Engagement

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Certainly the landscape of teacher learning has been transformed through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and Professional Learning Networks (PLNs). Teachers are more engaged in diverse networks of professional learning and dialogue than at any time in history. Yet, do we apply this same principle to our students?

While teachers continue to develop cooperative group work within their classrooms, the students' audience remains limited to class size. How does student engagement and learning become impacted when they have access to a wider, say global audience? The results are clear—students, particularly boys, are more engaged, motivated, and productive.

Step into this classroom and you will find the slogan, "This Classroom Has No Walls." Newer initiatives such as video-conferencing, webcasting, blogging, and access to programs that promote digital literacies are all embedded into daily instruction. Here, students have developed learning networks allowing them to webcast with astronauts, be directly instructed on principles of flight, robotics, genetics, and climate change by university professors and NASA scientists and to connect to other classrooms around the world.

The results of this purposeful connectivity is that this group of Grade 6 students has begun to develop a global perspective about issues of inequality – a revelation that could not have been as authentically discovered if they were engaged in solely traditional literature. To this end, these students have become 'enraged and engaged' and are contributing to their world through the development of digital textbooks (on USB sticks) to be sent over to children in Africa through the Teachers Without Borders program. (This was an idea relayed to them through their network of educational friends.)

Recent surveys reveal that most boys are more engaged in literacy outside of school than in. While boys choose to engage in these networks for leisure, what is really noted is that most of their learning styles and needs are immediately met through technological mediums. Allowing students to access the technologies in a manner that reflects their world outside of the classroom has almost become a new 'moral imperative', particularly for boys. Today's students are 'digital natives.' Their access to the internet has created a generation of inherently constructivist, critical learners.

Harnessing and guiding that learning becomes the emergent role of the teacher in the 21st century classroom.

So how do teachers get started? How do they begin to embed connectivity into classroom instruction to create a differentiated and constructivist learning environment? Students are constructing learning networks in a way that mirrors teacher learning networks. All anyone needs to begin is a computer—and most of us can find that. Beyond that, it is about finding and sustaining learning relationships that can keep everyone moving through the dreaded implementation dip.

Connectivity through our computers has revolutionized not just what we think about but how we think about it. The internet is to the computer what Sesame Street was to television. It has dramatically altered how we view the purpose of the medium.

And like those children who counted down with “The Count” or answered Steve on “Blues Clues,” today’s students are engaged in constructing their learning through global connections that are immeasurable in scope. The internet has shifted the learning landscape.

-- with files from teacher Sue Milner

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You Can Become a ‘Connectivity Convert’ too!

Here’s How....

Before:

- During a PLC, let staff know that you are going to try something new—many will want to support or follow along with your journey

-contact your IT department to determine who might be available to support you

-release the ‘sage on the stage’-- know that you will be a guide not expert

-surf or join existing educational networks such as “Learning Connections” through the LNS, “CICL (Center for Interactive and Collaborative Learning),” “Edu-blogs.org,” “Yes I Can Science”

-Understand the purpose and application of each technology and determine how it supports your curriculum outcome or strategy

-talk to your students about the programs you intend to introduce. In most cases there is already a student expert

-when planning, consider embedding the access to technology at all stages of the learning cycle.

-bring about Web-Awareness by introducing the activities and lessons found at: “Media Awareness Network”

-consider the scope of your project. Start small so that you can all experience success. Responding to existing blogs and creating a dialogue is

perhaps the easiest way to get connected. In the beginning, if possible, always choose to view student blogs before posting. This helps establish the idea that this is an educational experience and that teachers are an audience

During:

-model expectations in shared or guided sessions in the same manner that you would model any subject area

-ensure that students understand the purpose of their writing or interactions. They are representing and developing their identity as a student, and not representing themselves as they might on other social networking sites such as Facebook

-have students develop a “Shared Tips” folder so that they can add ideas or cool links, etc.

-choose an ‘in-house’ critical friend and cheerleader. This will keep you going when you need an immediate sounding board. As with anything, there will be glitches and celebrations

- develop an on-line PLN of people who can sustain you. Many teachers are out there looking to connect on an idea or issue. Then watch for authentic engagement, authentic learning, and be patient

After:

-deconstruct with your class what worked, what didn’t, next steps. Then evaluate the product and process. You will be amazed at what you and your students have learned

-introduce a template such as the SMART goals and give it a go again