



Using Technology Tools for Learning

This summer, I had the opportunity to present a workshop at one of the VSTE/DOE Summer Camps for ITRTs. My topic--I thought--was Online Collaboration. It turns out the topic was actually Online Collaboration Tools. My mistake led me to some serious thinking about how we approach technology in schools.

Because of my mistake, I spent about half of my workshop time talking not about tools but about opportunities. There are wonderful online projects (see page 4 for some specific examples) that allow our teachers and students to get outside the walls of the classroom. These projects are often standards-based and address a wide variety of content areas. They range in complexity and length from simple one- or two-day activities to intensive semester-, or even year-long, projects. There really is something for everyone.

Here's the important part, at least in my opinion. By getting teachers excited about a project that has solid connections to the curriculum, we then have a perfect reason for turning their attention to all those great Web 2.0 tools that promote online collaboration. They'll be able to more clearly understand why someone would want to use something called Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>) or Twitter (<http://www.twitter.com>). And, we also have a good reason to go to the IT folks in our school division and talk seriously about the filtering policies. By focusing attention on the curriculum rather than the tools, we can start a conversation about how these tools support teaching and learning and how we can use them safely with our students.

The groups I spoke to over the summer seemed receptive to this idea of starting with the curriculum. I also suggested a few tips for making the online collaborative experience successful. First, don't feel like you have to start with the BIG project. Collaboration doesn't have to take place across the globe. Maybe you just want to establish a collaborative project between an elementary and high school in your own school division. Second, consider the level of access needed to be successful with a project. If your school only has one lab, then choosing a project that requires the students to be online every day is probably not a good idea. Third, consider ways that teachers might collaborate on a project. Many projects are cross-curricular so they provide a chance to different teachers to share the extra work that will naturally be associated with any project.

I will admit that I had a moment of panic when I saw the title of my presentation in the program. But, I'm glad I made the mistake I did. And, I hope you'll think about implementing an online project at your school this year!

Conference Calendar

The best place to look for educational technology conferences is at T.H.E. Journal (<http://www.thejournal.com/>). Their searchable calendar is a comprehensive guide to national and international conferences. In this space, we'll be featuring conferences of particular interest to Virginia educators. This month, I've added a few online events, often called "webinars."

Educational Technology Leadership Conference: December 5-7, 2007, Roanoke, Virginia.

Now in its 13th year, the Educational Technology Leadership Conference is co-sponsored by the Virginia Department of Education and the Virginia Society for Technology in Education. This year, the conference will provide a wealth of presentations designed to align with and explore the goals and objectives of the five major components of Virginia's long-range educational technology plan: integration, professional development, connectivity, educational applications, and accountability. Presentations related to Internet Safety will also be included. Presentation proposals are still being accepted. Visit the website for more information:

<http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Technology/OET/conf.shtml>

Virginia Society for Technology in Education, February 24-27, 2007, Roanoke, Virginia.

Come see how technology rocks in Virginia! This state-wide conference is now in its 22nd year. With over 1,200 attendees and a full two-and-a-half days of presentations, hands-on workshops, and the always popular extravaganza, this conference is high energy. Co-sponsored by the Virginia Society for Technology in Education and the Virginia Department of Education. Learn more at the website:

<http://www.vste.org/conference.html/>

T&L Conference, October 17-19, 2007, Nashville, Tennessee

T+L is an educational technology event for district leadership teams. Presented by the National School Boards Association (NSBA), T+L provides a truly unique learning experience for teams of technology directors, superintendents, school board members, district administrators, principals, and lead teachers. This year, the conference focuses on six big ideas including professional development, one-to-one initiatives, tools for the classrooms, 21st century skills, using data, and open source initiatives. Visit the website for more information:

<http://www.nsba.org/t+l/>

K-12 Online 2007, October 22-26, 2007. Online

The second annual conference will be held in October and feature keynotes, podcasts, and more. I'll be doing a presentation on copyright. All online...so you can attend a conference without getting out of your fuzzy slippers. Learn more at

<http://k12onlineconference.org>.



Good Reads



We can't be good technology ambassadors if we aren't well-informed. Each month, I'll be highlighting interesting, relevant sources from research projects to government reports and ezines to bloggers.

Technology Matters: Questions to Live With

This small book, written by David E. Nye, examines ten questions related to technology use throughout history. While it does not focus specifically on education, the questions he explores are certainly relevant to educators grappling with how best to use technology with students. Nye rejects technological determinism, or the idea that we have no say in the future, arguing instead that indi-

viduals and cultures make choices about whether or not to adopt technology and, once adopted, how to best use that technology. Yet, some technologies (think chalkboards and pencils) seem to be so completely integrated that their use is considered "natural." There is, according to Nye, no single best path to technology integration, and we must be constantly examining our relationships to technology to be sure we are heading in the right direction. If you're interested, you can listen to a podcast of Nye discussing the major themes of the book: <http://www.podcastdirectory.com/podshows/333336>.

Just for Fun (and maybe some learning, too!)

Google Earth--and Sky!

*Astronomy compels the soul
to look upwards and leads us
from this world to another.*

~Plato

I always joke that I hope Google doesn't turn out to be the anti-Christ as I feel as though I've sold my soul to them! (I recently had a chance to share that joke with a real Google employee; he laughed politely then went on to tell me what an ethical company it was. I'm reassured a bit.) The latest cool thing coming out of Google-land is an update to Google Earth called Sky. You guessed it: Google takes on the heavens. Besides being a sophisticated star chart, Google Sky includes tours of the galaxy such as the life of a star or beginning backyard astronomy. The software integrates spectacular photos from the Hubble telescope and detailed descriptions of particular stars and planets. It's free and available for download here: <http://earth.google.com/>.

Finding Online Projects

As I mentioned in the introduction, I conducted a workshop on Online Collaboration at one of the ITRT Summer Camps. The webpage for the workshop can be found here: <http://witchyrichy.wikispaces.com/YorkSummerCamp>. Below are just a few of the projects that are available for teachers and students.

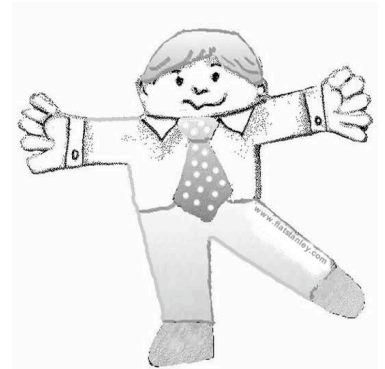
Letters to Santa



This was the first collaborative project I did with my students. My seventh graders played Santa to a group of second graders in Ireland. It was easy, fun, and short-term. Here's the description from the website: "Around the world, Santa Claus plays an important role in a multitude of cultures. In the United States, he has become a true American folk icon. When you register for this project, we match you up with a partner classroom with which your students exchange their Santa Letters. Younger students write letters to Santa; older students impersonate Santa and send their carefully crafted replies. Our guidelines and materials have been used successfully with thousands of happy classes." You can learn more at the website: <http://www.globalschoolnet.org/GSH/project/santa/index.cfm>

Travel Buddies

Travel Buddy projects are often used at the elementary school level and can reinforce skills in a variety of curriculum areas. The basic idea is that a "buddy," which might be anything from a woodchuck to a flat little boy to a lady bug, moves from one classroom to another, sharing photos and stories between the students. There has even been a traveling "techno" buddy, a teddy bear that takes advantage of the Internet to do its travelling and saves the teachers a trip to the post office. The Global SchoolNet Foundation, which sponsors many online projects, provides a registry for lots of different travel buddy projects. Here's the link: <http://www.globalschoolnet.org/programs/travelbuddies/index.html>



iEARN Learning Circles



If you are looking for a more intensive project that includes a public service component, the International Education and Resource Network (iEARN) is the place for you. One of their projects, called Learning Circles, are highly interactive, project-based partnerships among a small number of schools located throughout the world. There are two sessions each year, September - January and January - May. Registration for the September 2007 session is taking place now. Just visit the website to learn more: <http://www.earn.org/circles/>.