

Kid 2 kid CONNECTIONS

How to use technology to connect your students to a larger world.

By Ron Schachter

Skype, Edmodo, iApps, and Shutterfly may sound like fantasy characters or mythical creatures from some futuristic novel. But the students at Paine Primary School in Trussville, Alabama, will gladly explain that these odd-sounding names belong to the Web 2.0 applications in which they are fast becoming fluent. And for these kids—and those at other elementary schools where teachers are lead-

ing their students onto the cutting edge of educational technology—the future is now.

What students and teachers alike are finding most exciting is that many of Web 2.0's evolving applications are free and allow classrooms to do things like videoconfer- ence around the world, create multimedia projects, hold online discussions, and collaboratively edit student work. Read on to learn how classrooms are making it happen!

PHOTO: © WWW.IMAGESOURCE.COM

1. IPAD REVOLUTION

Why are schools from as far away as Brazil and Korea interested in what's happening at an elementary in Mineola, New York, on suburban Long Island? This year, the school started an iPad pilot project, and now 200 fifth graders are using the devices daily. And they are far from the only ones—third graders in the small Oregon district of Canby are using both iPods and iPads.

"We've recovered so much learning time" through our iPod and iPad use, brags Joseph Morelock, Canby's director of technology and innovation. How

is that possible? He claims that because the devices are always on, elementary students have been using, for example, a quick two-minute math app to refresh their skills as they transition from recess to class. Recapturing this time each day adds up to six full school days, he surmises. His district of 5,000 students has 3,000 iPods and 300 iPads. "The kids are engaged," Morelock says. "The shiny, new factor has worn off—now they're just using it as a tool."

In Mineola, Superintendent Michael Nagler got an unexpected side benefit after outfitting one school's fifth-grade class with iPads. Because the school

was close to his office, a group of students playing nearby took it upon themselves to give him a daily update when he was going home. "Today we did a Keynote on tsunamis," students told him. Other students are sending him projects they completed on the devices. "No student have ever done that before," he says. Plus, students are introducing teachers to apps that are instructive and fun. Stack the States, a \$0.99 game that helps students learn state capitals, shapes, and nicknames, was an early favorite in Long Island. "You never know what's going to be a hit," Nagler says. —Wayne D'Orio

2. COME TOGETHER ON EDMODO

At Red Hill Elementary School in North Garden, Virginia, Laurel Gillette and Blair Davis have introduced the classroom communications tool Edmodo to their third graders. The Facebook-style program allows teachers and students to upload content, from writing to pictures to iMovies, and add comments about that content in a safe environment.

“We’ve been using Edmodo to connect—synchronously and asynchronously—with each other’s classroom as well as other schools in the county to share student work and comments,” explains Davis. “Once I see students posting, I affirm and encourage them to think deeper.”

“For science, I’ve had kids discuss their observations on topics such as the characteristics of different animals and adaptations,” says Gillette. “It just engages kids. They get excited when they know they’re talking to their friends and making new friends as they discuss what they’re learning.”

Gillette adds that Edmodo provides a platform for ongoing class discussions on questions from “Are clothes a need or a want?” to “Was Amelia Earhart an explorer?” She notes that “it allows for a conversation to continue at any time, and we can follow with additional questions.”

The two Red Hill teachers also make productive use of Wallwisher, which allows students to post stickies on a virtual wall as a prelude to a classroom discussion. “We did one for Earth Day where we asked, ‘What are your pledges to protect the Earth?’” Gillette explains. “We got good ideas from each other and talked about them.”



3. THIRD-GRADE TWITTER

At Virginia’s Red Hill Elementary, Laurel Gillette has set up a Twitter account for the third grade to provide another outlet for students to communicate their educational experiences. “I hope we’ll be able to tweet about the field trips we’ve taken, what we’ve learned, and the books we’ve read,” she says.

Trussville tech trainer April Chamberlain also stays on the lookout for new ideas—from experts and students. She follows the Twitter accounts of educational consultants for additional uses of Web 2.0 technologies, as well as the site Geeky Weekly, which features tech tips and ideas. And the students are valuable sources for finding out about new and useful programs. “We can’t know every tool that’s available,” she says. “We just need to be open to what others are finding.”

4. LEARNING BY SMARTPHONE

For the past three years, teachers at St. Marys Primary and St. Marys Intermediate, an hour north of Dayton, Ohio, have been using smartphones for instruction in grades three through six. And, students have been making gains in their academic subjects, thanks to devices that are routinely banned at most other schools.

“I use them mostly for writing and math,” says fourth-grade teacher Scott Newcomb. Newcomb’s students

use smartphones (with texting and voice features shut off) with software designed by GoKnow! that lets students use the Web, write in Word, and draw and animate with GoKnow!’s Sketchy program.

“In math class, students create problems on their handhelds, beam them to their neighbors, who then beam back a solution,” Newcomb says. The students then beam their efforts to his computer for Newcomb to grade. Newcomb’s students also use smartphones for “round-table” writing, in which one student writes a sentence and beams it to another, who adds a second sentence,

PHOTO: © ALEXIS/ISTOCKPHOTO

5. SCIENCE BY SKYPE

At Paine Elementary outside of Birmingham, using Skype—the increasingly popular teleconferencing tool—has become routine from kindergarten on. Classes usually gather in the school library and sit cross-legged facing the overhead screen that displays teleconferencing partners from Indiana to Cambodia. The Paine students take turns approaching a microphone and USB camera attached to a centrally located laptop computer and ask the questions they have prepared in advance on index cards.

Charlene Hallman, Paine’s technology integration specialist, recalls a science-oriented second-grade Skype session with a class in Indiana last year that focused on comparing the local vegetation in each area. “Our kids showed a sample of our soil, which is red clay. Their soil was blacker and more dense,” she explains. “And our second-grade teacher brought in a cotton plant to show, which the students in Indiana had not seen before. It’s one thing to read about a plant, but to see and

talk with another child in a different place who has grown his own plant makes it much more real.”

Skype has emerged as an easy-to-use, relatively reliable way of videoconferencing, and those who have begun using it regularly in the classroom offer some tips for those starting out.

Before you connect to another classroom or guest speaker, make sure you have come up with clear and achievable objectives for the session. Outline your plan. If your class will be Skyping with another class, share your objectives with the other teacher.

Have your students prepare questions on index cards that they can ask when their turn comes up in the Skype session, and purchase an inexpensive stand-up microphone to make it easier for students to ask their questions and be heard.

Younger students (grades K–2) can probably handle about 30 minutes sitting still and watching a Skype session.

Check out Skype in Schools (skypeinschools.pbworks.com), where teachers list the kind of classroom partners they are seeking and specify the topics they would like to cover.

ter sandwich. If they’re learning three-digit addition, they can make a slide for each step, which they eventually turn into a slide show.”

“We’ve expanded the classroom to anywhere, anytime,” says Kyle Menchhofer, the district technology coordinator for St. Marys Schools. “Our students went to a history museum, took pictures with their smartphones, imported them into Sketchy, wrote about what they had seen, and uploaded them to the GoKnow! servers so everyone back at school could view their projects even before they got back.”

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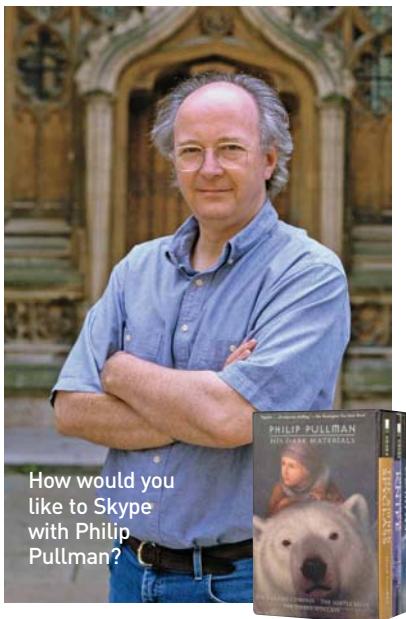
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classroom tech



How would you like to Skype with Philip Pullman?

6. AUTHOR VISITS AND PHOTO BOOKS

Paine students also have visited via Skype with various authors, including a Tennessee-based creator of alphabet books, who took a second-grade class through one of his works letter by letter. The lesson did not end there. While second graders at the school traditionally create their own paper alphabet books on pages bound with red string, this group of students upped the game. They took pictures of objects to go with their individual letters and published electronically. (For *T*, one youngster gathered classmates together in a hallway for a picture of a tornado drill.)

"In the computer lab, we walk through transferring their pictures and cropping them with Picnik photo editing," Paine's tech specialist Charlene Hallman says. They then upload the finished photos and accompanying text to Shutterfly, a free website for creating photo projects.

"The wonderful thing about Shutterfly is that after you upload your pictures, it says, 'Would you like to create a book?'" explains April Chamberlain, the district's technol-

ogy trainer. "We try to use as many free resources as we can."

The electronic book that the Paine second graders created has pages that turn, including a class picture at the end. The multiple authors dubbed themselves Paine Primary Publishers, and the school librarian ordered a hardbound copy. "The children had a big 'author signing' party," Chamberlain recalls. "They all signed the book, the librarian put a barcode on it, and it sits next to the other alphabet books in the library. When I was growing up, we just wrote for a grade. My own child came home from that class and said, 'I am a writer. I can write.'"

Paine students have even broken new ground using YouTube, Chamberlain notes. "We've had kids make video book reports about Goosebump books," she says. "They have a world presence, and every few months we get comments from viewers saying, 'This is really cool.'"

Second graders upload their book reports and other work to a private school website administered by Chamberlain, which becomes the beginnings of a digital portfolio that will continue throughout their academic careers at Trussville. "First and second graders also record their writing, using the online Audacity audio recorder and editor, three times during the year," Chamberlain says, noting that these entries become food for reflection. "Their teacher asks them, 'What do you need to work on? What are you doing better?'"

Third graders, meanwhile, e-mail their parents two "burning questions" to which their parents respond, and they e-mail experts chosen by their teachers on various topics. Other Paine Primary projects involve e-mailing holiday cards created in the Paint.net drawing program to partner schools that teachers have found on the Projects by Jen website, a clearinghouse for educators who believe deeply in collaborating online. □