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Light a Fire by Integrating the Internet in Today's Classroom

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Abstract

Using the Internet in today's classroom can be exciting and challenging for both the teacher and students. Effective use of the Internet takes careful planning. Technology-rich lessons should stimulate students and lead them to self-directed learning activities. Internet integration in the learning process gives teachers a way to motivate students to teach themselves and find joy in sharing their work with a wide audience. Changes in the way students learn and discover knowledge occur as students are guided through effective lessons using the Internet. Teachers' roles change in the classroom from the old style of disseminating knowledge to that of creating an environment for students to have experiences with new content.

Lighting a Fire by Integrating the Internet in Today's Classroom

Geoffrey Browther is often quoted by educators as saying, "It [education] cannot be compared to filling up an empty pot, but rather to . . . lighting a fire. The proper test of an education is whether it teaches the pupil to think and whether it awakens his interest in applying his brain to the various problems and opportunities life presents." As a matter of fact, I have this quote on the wall in my classroom. It was given to me by our PTA years ago. I have held on to it over the years because it inspires me to think differently. As educators, we are entrusted to educate the young minds of America. Educators are redefining their role in the classroom. Some are asking, "Should I just fill them up with knowledge and test them to see if they still have it? Or should I motivate, and educate, them to learn and discover knowledge themselves?" Many educators, today, favor the latter approach; but how is this done? What new tools can we use effectively to best serve the students that walk into our classrooms in this 21st century?

Most teachers are teaching in classrooms that resemble the schoolhouse of 100 years ago (Goss, 1996). The model seems to be the same as always with the teacher in front of the class, students sitting at desks, and information being disseminated (Hoerr, 2000). This is the commonly accepted "filling the pot" philosophy. Something happened in the 1990's that has begun to change the old model significantly and give us hope for a future educational reform.

Educators today face significant challenges to using the Internet in the classroom. School districts face untrained educators, inadequate funding resources, and an infrastructure that does not support radical changes in teaching models that the Internet

brings to a classroom (Masullo, 2000). The business community has lead the way to harnessing the power of technology. America's work place looks and feels different than ever a half a century ago. Schools have a long way to go to catch up (Goss, 1996).

Schools across America are now connected to the Internet and the World Wide Web (Masullo, 2000). A growing number of teachers are beginning to use the Internet in their classrooms. Some gather the students around a single computer and show websites that connect to the classroom curriculum. Other classes use a projector to enlarge the Internet screen for a better look at an Internet site. Still others have multiple computers available in the classroom for students to use singularly, or in groupings, to truly explore sites and participate in webquests and other Internet-related learning activities including communication. Some teachers are using the Internet all day long and fully integrating the Internet in all subject areas. They are using project-based or "designed-based" learning strategies to help students make real-world connections (Robertson, 2000). These teachers are finding the way they teach is changing and the way students learn is drastically different.

Teachers everywhere are asking themselves how they can manage this new tool and what strategies work best to teach effectively while integrating the Internet in their classroom. More importantly, what is the role of the teacher in this new classroom that is now connected to the world? I would propose that this new technology revolution has the potential to light that fire in students. As more teachers are using this tool they are finding effective ways of managing the technology in their classroom.

Bill Robertson has introduced an intriguing five-phased approach to effectively utilize the Internet in instruction (Robertson, 2000). These phases are: planning, research, development, refinement, and implementation. Educational technology is no longer taught in isolation, but it is imbedded into a task facilitating the learning process. This approach has teachers focus on planning as a first and crucial step to meeting a desired objective. An educator must begin with a “hook” to create interest in the learner. The instructor can pose an open-ended question that will frame the subject that will be studied. Students should have a chance to reflect on what they already know about a topic and ask themselves what further knowledge must be obtained.

Next begins the research phase. Students need time to explore the content area. This takes careful planning on the teacher’s part to guide the students to Internet safe resources that will provide the answers they are seeking. A teacher’s role begins to change to that of a facilitator. Students often become “experts” in certain areas that far surpass the teacher’s knowledge base (Girod, Cavanaugh, 2001). This empowers the students and often motivates them to extend the learning beyond classroom time and expectations.

The third phase of development allows the learner to put their ideas into a format that will allow them to demonstrate what they have learned. The teacher may provide a specific format for this stage or students may be allowed to use various formats they are familiar with in the classroom. Software programs such as Inspiration, PowerPoint, KidPics might be chosen for students to share their newly acquired knowledge.

Refinement is the next phase that develops and refines the student's work to make it ready for sharing. If students are publishing their work to the Internet they may become highly motivated to edit and revise their project.

The implementation phase allows the student to demonstrate the learning that has taken place. This project or design-based learning lends itself to public display. Parents or community leaders may be invited to take part in this celebration of learning. Students experience a strong sense of ownership when they have moved through this process.

By carefully planning and implementing this five-phased approach the teacher appears to stand by and let it happen. In reality it has been the teacher that has created the learning environment that lights the spark to start the fire. Using technology in the classroom does not diminish the role of the teacher (Hoerr, 2000). The teacher becomes the human voice of encouragement, the human face of approval, and the human heart of devotion.

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