

PRINCIPAL SABBATICALS

To explore the use of Web2.0 technologies and other ICT tools to support guided inquiry and collaborative learning experiences in our school community; to learn to use these tools myself and increase my pedagogical skills in facilitating students higher order thinking through Web 2.0; to investigate strategies for engaging the school community in guided inquiry initiatives.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Board of Trustees of Oromahoe School for the support they gave me in undertaking my sabbatical. I also thank my deputy principal, Pauline Stephinson, and other school staff, who stepped up to carry out extra duties in my absence.

I acknowledge the NZEI and MOE for establishing a number of sabbaticals as is specified in the Primary Principals' Collective Agreement (PPCA). The sabbatical funds relief costs to the school, in accordance with the PPCA, for the duration of sabbatical, as an acknowledgement of the job being done by Principals throughout the country.

Summary

This sabbatical leave was an experience for which I am very humbly grateful . The express rationale of the leave is to provide an opportunity for the recipient to engage in a balance of professional learning, reflection and rejuvenation. Once my jury service for the whole of the first week of the term was out of the way I realised that relaxation and rejuvenation was actually my greatest need at that time. Of course, as any teacher knows, reflection and continuous learning are part and parcel of the profession.

As a digital immigrant, slow on the uptake of this technology, there was a great deal to learn. It quickly became clear that the main emphasis of my professional learning would be to discover the range of and explore the personal use of web-based tools. The scope of my supposed research as detailed above was far too broad and pretentious.

I was in awe of the information available to me both here and overseas through the internet and soon realized that my meagre contribution will not stand too much scrutiny....but it made me think. I learned a great deal

Rationale

The Vision of the NZC is that students will be “confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners” and that- “Schools should explore not only how ICT can supplement traditional ways of teaching but also how it can open up new and different ways of learning”. Page 36

I thought that the major purpose of my review was to look at how schools that have been involved in an ICTPD cluster, or are identified as schools that are successfully integrating ICT into their programmes, are using ICT to open up new and different ways of learning. What eventuated was that despite our school being involved in such a cluster, I had not been able to keep up with the learning and I did not have enough personal capability in the field to make valid judgements on this topic. So my area of investigation largely morphed into personal up-skilling and having professional conversations with individual teachers rather than with schools as a whole.

Activities

I bought a book “Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms” by Will Richardson.

I attended a seminar delivered by Ross Todd about Guided Inquiry and how the school library can support an effective programme.

I had informal conversations with colleagues and visits to other classrooms.

I set out to experiment with some of the over 3000 (more than 2000 of them are free to download) web 2.0 tools available, the purpose of which is to not just locate and evaluate information, but to use it to create knowledge and share ideas. (cf Web 1.0) Of course this is what we want for our students – to be actively involved and connect with others – but actually, way outside my comfort zone.

So which ones to use?

Findings

Despite claims by some ‘experts’ that you don’t have to be a proficient user yourself – that the children would teach you - the most successful implementation of Web 2.0 tools in the classrooms was where the teacher was passionate and using the technology comfortably in his/her own life. In these classrooms the tools were genuinely being used to foster creativity, collaboration and the intellectual, social and cultural growth of the students.

Given that scenario the exact choice of tools seems to be less critical. However the following are some guidelines for selection

- Does it promote critical thinking?
- Does it support the stages of the information search process? (Kuhlthau, C. C. Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services.

Libraries Unlimited, 2004)

- Does it provide Guided Inquiry through intervention and help?
- Does it encourage authentic learning?
- Does it help the teacher gather evidence of student performance and progress?
- Does it help us make teaching decisions based on evidence?

Every teacher has preferred tools and there are always new ones to be explored.

Two of the most commonly used tools in the classrooms I visited were blogs and wikis.

Blogs were particularly useful for

- building background knowledge: eg present 5 new facts I have learned;
- Focus-Formulation: developing the deep questions through interrogation of posting(s) What questions spring to mind as you read this?
- Collection: Authentic research tool: data collection -> analysis and synthesis of ideas
- Reflective response to instructional program
- Class portal for communication
- Online filing cabinets
- E-Portfolios

Whereas wikis were found to be more useful for

- Collaborative, open, contributory, living documents; people working together to generate and maintain a document
- Social construction of knowledge; negotiation of meaning: group's best effort, not an individual; community watchdog, soft security
- Working as a team / group / community in a shared information space: giving students control of knowledge construction and editorial control – responsibility and ownership

Useful places I found for getting started: wikispaces.com; pbworks.com; twiki.org; wikispot.org; wikihow.com

Other popular tools are

- [Wordle.net](http://wordle.net)
- [Wordsift.com](http://wordsift.com)
- [Wallwisher.com](http://wallwisher.com)
- [Google.com-WonderWheel](http://google.com-wonderwheel)
- [Google.com/squared](http://google.com/squared)

Implications

One of the implications of having the children working in an online environment is of course their safety which I am not going to explore here. But equally, it is more than ever, ensuring that they have the critical thinking skills to evaluate what they see and read. The students must be taught to question everything. A useful discussion of this in: "Web 2.0 Meets Information Fluency". By Joyce Kasman Valenza, Ph.D. Springfield Township High School

Conclusions

There are many websites, blogs and online journals to support learning in this area (too many to list and they are being developed and added to all the time). The only way through the medley is to open up the web browser, take a look and trial some that look interesting for yourself. "New Zealand Interface" magazine is a really good place for NZ teachers to start. (interfaceonline.co.nz)

Through my inquiry and observations I am drawn to conclude that it doesn't appear to matter which tools are used as long as they are used as tools to support a process of learning which has integrity. And that there is a parallel focus on safe internet use and robust evaluation skills.

*"If living is seeing
I'm holding my breath
In wonder – I wonder
What happens next?
A new world, a new day to see"*

Bjork - New Worlds "Selmasongs" album