
Making the Most of New Media: Library 2.0

Technology can transform a school's information hub, but only with the help of good, old-fashioned research and thinking skills.

By Pamela H. Derringer

Since the spring of 2005, students at Lakeview (MI) High School have experienced the Holocaust much differently from most American students. That's because they're not just learning facts and figures. It all started when Lakeview students entered into a thoughtful discussion of a popular Holocaust memoir with their counterparts in Cold Spring Harbor, New York. The long-distance dialogue was conducted entirely by blogging over the Internet. Although one might question the point of the interchange when there is no shortage of students in either location, Lakeview High media specialist Margaret Lincoln believes that the public exchange motivated participants to read and think through the material much more rigorously. "They put forth their best effort," Lincoln says. "Working with another group challenges students to analyze in greater depth. In the second semester we weren't able to do it with New York, and something was missing." The project wasn't limited to the blog session. Thanks in large part to Lincoln's efforts, Lakeview High won Kellogg Foundation funding to host a Holocaust Museum traveling exhibit for six weeks in the fall of 2005. Once the school secured the exhibit, Lincoln created many classroom activities that were inspired by it, and invited students from other Michigan schools to participate in these activities, spreading the benefit.

Holocaust understanding was further enhanced in fall 2006 when Lakeview's students participated in a videoconference with Holocaust survivor Gerda Weissmann Klein at the University of Pennsylvania, thanks to a special academic high-speed connection. Klein will be speaking in person at Lakeview High next April.

Not every aspect of this two-year-long interactive Holocaust lesson is technology based, but it all had origins in Lincoln's library. The interstate Holocaust discussion is just one example of how high-speed connectivity and web-based writing tools such as blogs (individual online writing) and wikis (collaborative online writing) are used in conjunction with old-fashioned research, reading, and discussion to bring education to a new level. And technology, instead of eliminating the need for libraries, has made them even more integral, since it is the librarian, or media specialist, as she is more likely to be called today, who must take the lead in promoting technology integration and training throughout the school system.

"Libraries can become the hub of the school, so innovations start here and push out to the classroom," says Sarah Chauncey, media specialist at Grandview Elementary, a K-3 school in Monsey, New York. "Librarians have more freedom [than classroom teachers] to be creative." And what happens in the library can—and should—enhance every aspect of classroom learning. The key to success, however, is the right mix of resources, as well as students and teachers who know how to use them.

The Whole Package

The backbone of successful high-tech libraries such as Lakeview High and Grandview Elementary typically includes a sufficient number of library computers to teach one or more classes research skills or specific subjects, plus smartboards, document cameras, video equipment, and other tools to conduct multimedia presentations.

Chauncey, a former computer consultant, has taken technology even further by incorporating what has been called "web 2.0"—a concept that includes blogs, wikis, and podcasting (student audio recordings). For instance, she teaches her K-3 students about mammals or the environment by reading and recording aloud (podcasting), writing, drawing, and watching videos, using many media and multiple senses to ensure the material is absorbed and understood.

"This is simply talking to the children in a language they are accustomed to," Chauncey says. "Information is not just found in texts but in graphs, video, and audio. You have to show them how to watch a video and take notes, and how to integrate it with text."

In a unit on endangered sea turtles, for example, Chauncey showed a video of scientists tagging turtles on a beach, and afterward zoomed down to the exact location using Google Earth. Students then viewed a presentation by the Natural History Museum in London and, finally, they sat in a circle and podcasted about the turtles. "By the time they were done, they were immersed in sea turtles from

every angle,” Chauncey says.

A kindergartner who found Chauncey’s unit on whales equally memorable last spring rushed up to her on the first day of school in the fall and shouted excitedly, “Whales are migratory!”

Last year, Chauncey used a smartboard and Macromedia Captivate software to record her words and actions, step by step, as she solved a math problem, meanwhile showing students how to blog. The mini-movie is saved on the school’s web site and can be played over and over until the lesson is absorbed. “It’s the perfect marriage of information and technology,” she says.

Anywhere, Anytime Learning

Chauncey created Lakeview’s program from scratch. Using complex asp.net programming software, she crafted a working library web site that enables Lakeview’s primary school teachers and students to access library resources and work on library-related lessons (often on their own initiative) from any computer at school or at home.

The web-based lessons are created on project-organizer templates, which can import preselected source materials and any type of media for a particular topic, such as sea turtles and whales. The librarian can view a master file that features ongoing work by each student, chatting with them and answering their questions online. The library site also includes podcasts of students reading book reports and telling stories, including a charming original story called “The Cat” that was written, narrated, and illustrated by Sarah, a first grader. The web site also has numerous other examples of student work, including wikis, blogs, and stories.

Chauncey meets with each class for 40 minutes a week, but extends that formal learning time by keeping tabs on students’ entries in the web-based project organizers. Third graders have been doing their own blogs, and, in the spring, they will be writing wikis, in research groups of four, for a unit on the desert, she adds.

Getting Back to Basics

But a strong library program must be more than multimedia eye candy. Every modern library needs specialized subscription databases (some libraries have 20 or more) to give students authoritative sources for their research projects. The alternative is an overreliance on Google. Students also need to be trained on how to evaluate a web site, do research, find information in hard-copy reference materials, and add citations and footnotes to their own work.

These basic skills, as unsexy as they sound, are often sorely lacking when students arrive at college. According to a survey by ETS, a nonprofit educational assessment organization, one-third of college students don’t have the critical-thinking skills to find, evaluate, or integrate online information in their research. The study’s findings validated long-held suspicions in college circles that incoming students were underprepared in the effective use of technology, according to Irving Katz, a senior research scientist at ETS.

Cecilia Freda, media specialist at Middletown High School South, in Middletown, New Jersey, came to the same conclusion after querying local college officials about what schools were doing right and wrong in developing library skills and what was still relevant.

“We fell in love with the Internet,” Freda says. But did we look before we leaped? she wonders. “Technology is not about being the biggest or the best. I’m not against it, but we need a broader picture.” Too many kids, Freda found, were relying exclusively on Google. Plagiarism soared, and reports had no “voice of the writer,” she says. So Freda launched fund-raisers to pay for subscription databases (the school now has about 19), and created pathfinder sheets to guide teachers to the best online and hard-copy resources for specific topics. She also initiated closer relationships with the city library, enabling teachers to reserve customized materials (art plates, for example) for specific assignments.

Most importantly, Freda developed a list of 25 research competencies (setting deadlines, focusing on a topic, finding books, creating a thesis statement, cross-referencing materials, using indexes and databases, etc.) upon which incoming freshmen and graduating seniors would be tested. Much work is ahead, and the school’s web site remains a work in progress, she acknowledges. Nevertheless, the key remains in helping students find and evaluate good information—from web sites and, yes, from books, the librarians agree.

“Students can’t think for themselves,” Freda says. And she is determined to change that. “Technology has to be balanced. That’s the need I’ve embraced.” @

About the Author

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