



Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts,

and Other Powerful **Web Tools** for Classrooms

On My Mind 07 Aug 07:08 am

If Every Student Had a Computer

So Sheryl and I have spent the last week here in Melbourne kicking off a four-month PLP project with 120 or so teachers from Victoria who are part of a pilot where all of their students will have netbooks in hand in the next few months. There seems to be a growing commitment here to put technology in the hands of kids (instead of spending huge sums on stuff that students can't use outside of the classroom) and to thinking about how practice and pedagogy changes when that



happens. There are a number of other initiatives that are attempting to reframe the way Victorian teachers think about teaching, namely something called E5 (pdf) that I'll be giving some more attention to on the plane ride home but that at first blush has some interesting language that focuses more on learning than teaching. And that's really what our work here has been about—trying to create opportunities for teachers to be learners first in both face-to-face and online

Will Richardson

9 Social Networks

*Facebook, Ning, Connections,
and Communities*

One of the most important pieces of reading from November of 2008 was a report titled “Living and Learning With New Media” that was released by the MacArthur Foundation and the Digital Youth Project (Ito et al., 2008). It details the results of a three-year study that examined “young people’s participation in the new media ecology.” Simply put, I think it’s a must read for anyone interested in understanding the lives of kids in these new, connected spaces. A key finding in the study was this: Our kids are using social networking technologies in two important ways. First, they engage in what the report calls “friendship-based ways,” which most adults are familiar with. These uses help kids stay connected to the people who they know in their physical spaces—their friends at school, the people they meet at summer camp, or their teammates, among others. I’m reminded of this every time I get stuck behind a school bus coming home and see students stepping off onto their driveways intently staring at their phones as they text the friend who was probably sitting next to them on the bus.

But the other way that youth are beginning to connect using these tools is more compelling. That is, kids are using social networks to “explore interests and find information that goes beyond what they have access to at school or in their local community” (Ito et al., 2008). And in these “interest-based” interactions, they are connecting to peers and adults outside of their physical spaces, people who they don’t know but with whom they share a passion. They become at once teachers and learners in these spaces, and, in the process, they learn about the things that school can’t or won’t teach them. In both of these interactions, whether friendship based or interest based, the

study found that kids engage in “self-directed, peer-based learning” that looks very different from most of their experiences in school.

There’s little question that therein lies the amazing appeal of the technologies that we’ve been talking about in this book, this ability to connect and learn with others around the things we really care about learning. (Sounds familiar by now, I hope.) And there’s also little doubt that that ability also complicates what we do as educators a great deal. At some point, we’re going to have to get our brains around what it means to participate in an online community or “social network” the way our kids are beginning to do if we really want to help them do it well.

From the friendship-based and interest-based perspectives, there are some ready-made sites and tools out there to help us, namely Facebook.com for the former and Ning.com for the latter. Both make group forming around the people we know or the interests we pursue almost too easy. But from an educational standpoint, they also pose a unique set of problems and challenges for classroom use, ones that can be fairly well overcome, as always, through a combination of personal experience, communication, instruction, and good policy. (I put “personal experience” first for a reason, by the way.)

If you don’t think there’s anything to this social networking thing, read on. For Facebook, the site that was started in a Harvard dorm room in 2004, the numbers are, in a word, staggering. At the beginning of July 2009, Facebook was growing by an amazing 700,000 accounts *per day*, and its total membership was close to 250 million (making it the fourth-largest country in the world were it a physical place) (Smith, 2009). But here is the real kicker: The fastest growing segment of Facebook users today is the over-55 set, meaning parents and grandparents are finally starting to figure out what all the fuss is about. (That of course means that Facebook will soon be anathema to all of our students—we can only guess where they’ll go next.)

In terms of Ning, a site that lets you create your own personal Facebook-like network around whatever your specific interest is, the numbers are equally impressive. The service, which launched in 2005, has hosted over 1.5 million networks at this writing, and it’s adding them at about half a million a year. Now, like Facebook’s numbers, not all of those are active accounts, but as of last April it had over 6 million active users on those sites, a number that continues steadily upward (Lardinois, 2009). And while Facebook does allow for some “interest-based” connections, there are some seriously powerful examples of groups coming together in Ning sites to do great work and great learning together.

The key to both of these sites for educators is to move beyond the friendship-based connections and really explore the potentials of the networked, interest-based learning that’s possible within these frames. They are places where sharing and collaboration and even collective action (in Clay Shirky’s words) can take place in some profound ways, and they are spaces that might allow us

to change the way we think about those things in the context of a much different, connected world. I love what last year's Humanities, Arts, Sciences and Technology Advanced Collaboratory study on "The Future of Learning Institutions in a Digital Age" had to say about the way we might reframe our concept of working together in the classroom (tinyurl.com/n4d4dh).

Learning has traditionally assumed a winner-take-all competitive form rather than a cooperative form. One cooperates in a classroom only if it maximizes narrow self-interest. Networked learning, in contrast, is committed to a vision of the social that stresses cooperation, interactivity, mutual benefit, and social engagement. The power of ten working interactively will invariably outstrip the power of one looking to beat out the other nine.

Frankly, connecting online or digitally with people we already know is pretty easy these days. Actually doing something together with them to learn or to make the world a better place is another story altogether. We can see it writ large at sites like Kiva.org, which allows us to provide microloans to those less fortunate, or TakingItGlobal.org, a social network that "connects you to the social issues that affect us all." Both of those sites make it easy to do good work in collaborative ways with other people and to learn a great deal in the process. The potential power of Facebook and Ning for educators, however, is that they allow us to personalize those potentials in the context of our own students and our own curriculum. In the process, we can teach students all sorts of important lessons about digital citizenship, safety, information literacy, and more.

FACEBOOK FOR PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Facebook, obviously, is a hot-button issue in the K-12 world, enough to cause many a teacher and administrator to throw up his or her hands and ask, "Why bother?" I'm just guessing here, but I'm thinking about 90 percent of public schools block it and would rather it didn't exist. There is no question that there are all sorts of opportunities for our kids to do stupid things there, things that parents might very well blame on us. But if for no other reason, we should bother because Facebook (and MySpace and Bebo and who knows what's to come) has become an important online space in our kids lives, a space that, once again, no one is teaching them how to leverage for learning. And, believe it or not, there is a great deal of learning that occurs and can occur on these social network sites, not just from a "network literacy" standpoint.

I'll get on my soapbox here again for a bit and suggest that whether we like it or not, if we're working with kids in schools (or elsewhere), we have a responsibility to understand what Facebook is all about, even if it's just to the extent that we participate there for ourselves, on our own time, for our own connections. I'm sure, in fact, that few of you are even able to use

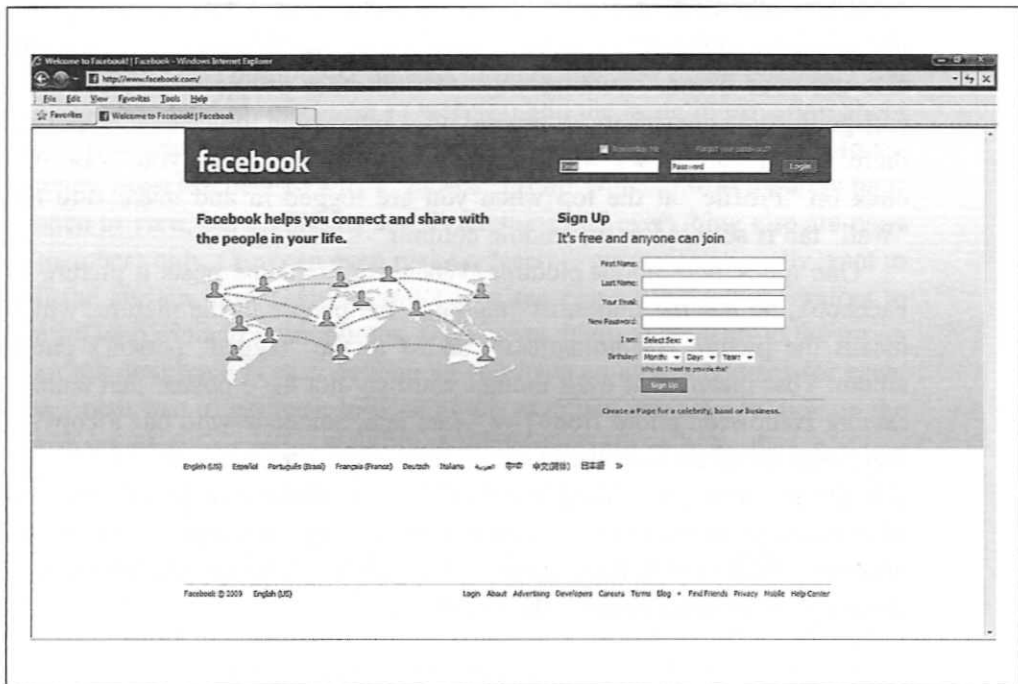
Facebook with your students because of district filtering or even pressure from state organizations or local unions. Even more, I've heard plenty of stories of teachers being told that they should not even have a personal Facebook profile because of the potential problems with putting parts of ourselves out there online. As you might guess, I find that appalling. Whatever the challenges that prevent us from making social networking a part of our curriculum, they should not stop us from being able to talk about Facebook or to share or model our own experiences there in appropriate ways so kids at an early age have some context for what the expectations and roles are that await them there. And, even more, no teacher should be denied exploration of a technology that with good pedagogy could be a valuable learning tool for students, or, more importantly, could provide important context for learning in general.

That being said, the instances of K–12 classrooms or schools using Facebook are still few and far between. The couple of examples that I'll show you later are representative of what relatively little is out there right now. But let me stress, my goal here is not so much to encourage you to bring social networking a la Facebook into your classroom as much as it is to bring it into your own personal practice. Not that you need it, but you hereby have my permission not to think too hard about your students or your classrooms or your schools here. Just focus on what you can learn from these types of connections and spaces that can inform your own learning.

From a personal, friendship-based-connections standpoint, signing up for a Facebook account is pretty straightforward. Just go to Facebook.com (Figure 9.1), fill out the form on the homepage, click on the link in the confirmation e-mail, and start finding friends to connect with. If you want, Facebook will scour your e-mail account to see who else might already be signed up. (This could be a good or bad thing.) Make sure to fill out your profile and add your picture so others can potentially find you. Remember, you can choose not to accept friend requests as they come in. And, without getting too deeply into the psychology of "friending," a topic that you can spend days reading and agonizing over, it's perfectly okay to leave some requests unanswered. (Note: Facebook offers a number of different levels of transparency that you might want to explore, and they are covered in great detail in the "Teacher's Guide to Using Facebook" by Bernadette Rego, which can be found at tinyurl.com/12yheq.)

To start searching for people who you might know, just click on "Friends" at the top of the page and then select "Find Friends" from the drop-down list. Use the "Search for People" form to start adding names of old high school friends, colleagues, former girlfriends or boyfriends, or even (gasp!) relatives. You may have to do some digging around because by this point there is hardly a unique name left to search for in the Facebook database.

Figure 9.1 Facebook is the largest social network in the world, adding over 700,000 people per day.



Once you do find someone you know, just click “Add as Friend” and that person will be sent a friend request asking to approve you. (Keep your fingers crossed.)

When you “friend” someone, what that means is that their updates will appear on your Facebook homepage. Just click the “Home” button at the top of the page when you are logged in. Understand that Facebook now aggregates a lot of the content your “friends” may be posting elsewhere like Twitter or their blogs, so what you’ll see may be more of a “life stream,” as some are calling it, rather than updates into Facebook. Or not. Some people I know use Facebook pretty exclusively as the place they update their lives and post online. It all depends on taste.

Either way, for those who have “friended” you to see what you’re up to, you’re going to have to post some updates. You do that by filling in the “What’s on your mind?” blank at the top of the updates column. Here you can wax philosophic about breakfast, post a picture of your lovable little puppy, add a video you found on YouTube, or pick apart the latest blog post you read about the merits of NCLB. Just remember that whatever you post there, your “friends”

will see it. And what they do with it is anyone's guess. (I have mentioned, haven't I, that nothing, I repeat, nothing is guaranteed to be private on the Web.)

Now, you can also leave messages to your individual friends by writing on their "wall." To do that, click on your friend's name and then enter a greeting (or photo, or video, and so on) where it says "Write Something." You can also use your friends' walls as ways to find other people to connect to or engage in some conversations around what interesting topics may be posted there. If you want to see what people have been writing on your wall, just click on "Profile" at the top when you are logged in and make sure the "Wall" tab is selected in the middle column.

One quick note about pictures. Whenever someone posts a picture to Facebook, he has the option of "tagging" the people in the picture, which means the picture is automatically added to the "tagged" person's photo album. That means that even though you may not have posted that embarrassing Halloween photo from five years ago, someone who has a copy of that photo could do just that and tag you with it. I tell you this not to scare you further away from using Facebook, but to make sure you understand what types of interactions our students are dealing with here. Figuring out how you will deal with these realities will go a long way toward helping you mentor your students through their own use.

FACEBOOK IN THE CLASSROOM

Obviously, we could go on for pages (entire books, in fact) on all of the other things that you can do with Facebook. You'll have to explore and learn on your own, perhaps even get answers from your social network as you become more and more of a "networked" learner. But I do want to touch on the ways in which you might think about using it in your classroom should the opportunity present itself and should you think it's the right technology for whatever it is you want to teach.

Some general advice to start—while some teachers don't seem to have any qualms about "friending" their students, I would advise against it. Make it clear to your classes that your use of Facebook is "interest-based" not "friendship-based," and make sure you articulate your reasons for choosing Facebook as a networking space. Articulate those same reasons to your supervisor and your principal to make sure your efforts are supported, and make sure the parents of your students are all on board as well. If you can't make the compelling case for using Facebook to their satisfaction, you may want to spend a little more time experimenting for yourself. Finally, when your group is up and running, share your story, good or bad, with your colleagues—both at your school and to those of us who are following from afar. We have a lot to learn as well.

Most uses of Facebook by teachers are grounded in the creation of either public but usually private groups on the site where classes can exchange information, write on each other's walls, answer questions, and create a shared space of materials for the course. (There is an add on to Facebook called "Courses" that you might want to explore as well.) To create a group, just go to tinyurl.com/ldq867 and go through the easy setup process. (You need to be logged in, of course.) Once you add the basic information about your group on the first page, the second page allows you to set the transparency. Most teachers go with a "closed" group, which means the front page is open to view, but all photos and discussions and everything else are open to members only. (You can even make a "secret" group if you really want to pull the curtain closed. Other options on the page allow administrators to control who can add links, photos, and videos. Inviting students to the group from the next page is easy as long as you have an e-mail address for each. Remember that to get back to your group page you can always click on the link that will appear under your "Profile" on the "Info" tab. As always, if you struggle, odds are pretty good that you can turn to one of your more trusted students to help.

So let's look at a couple ways that teachers and schools are beginning to dabble in the Facebook universe. (See Figures 9.2 and 9.3.)

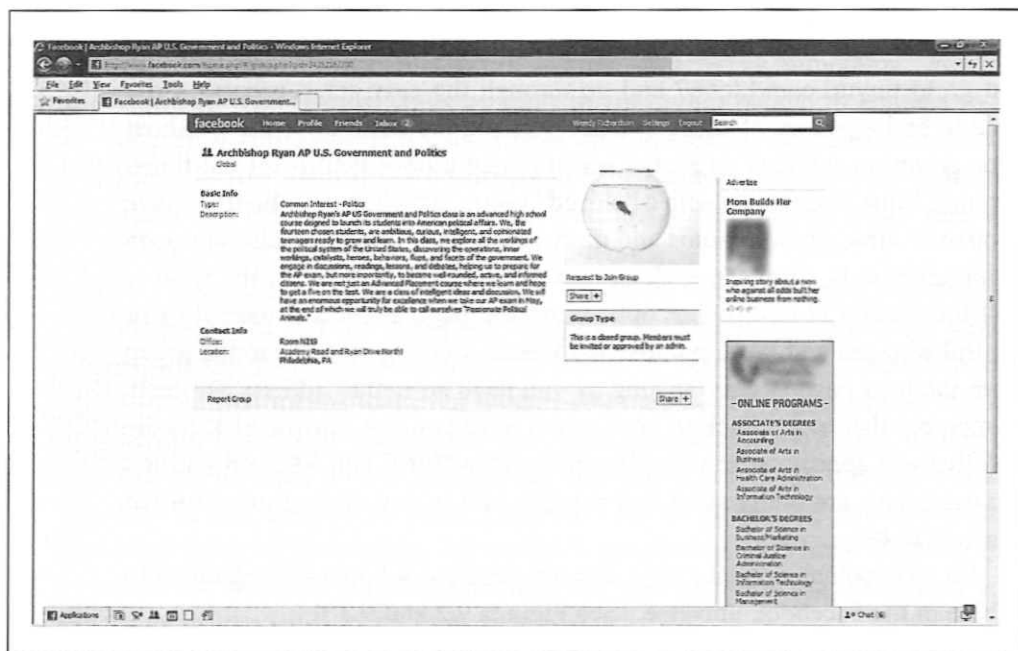
Jim Meredith, a Catholic school social studies teacher in Philadelphia, was looking for a way to engage his students more fully in his curriculum and thought Facebook might be the answer. "When I mentioned Facebook, it caused a massive buzz in the room," Jim says. "Every one of them already had their own accounts. They were so enthusiastic, and I knew the die had been cast" (J. Meredith, personal communication, July 7, 2009).

He decided to create a totally private site for his class, and after some discussions with the technology coordinator, the Archdiocese agreed to unblock Facebook from his office and classroom computers (upon request). Jim began by holding two class sessions dedicated to Internet use and appropriateness. Afterward, each Monday Jim posted a discussion board topic to which each student had to post a response by the following Friday. He told them that the "wall" was their space to post any appropriate material that they thought would add to the class discussions, and they quickly began to add relevant photos and videos. It all worked about as well as he could have hoped.

"The unintended consequence of our private group is that it built a strong class community," Jim says. "Quiet kids in class spoke up online, and when we had a student who had a serious health issue in the spring, the class used the group to lift her up and keep her informed" (J. Meredith, personal communication, July 7, 2009).

In fact, students asked to keep the Facebook group going after the course ended. While he's not sure whether or not Facebook was the reason, course enrollment for the fall of 2009 jumped from 14 to 26, and Jim plans to create

Figure 9.2 An AP U.S. Government and Politics class on Facebook: Archbishop Ryan AP U.S. Government and Politics (tinyurl.com/kkabum)



new groups for that new class as well as for a freshman World History class. As Jim says, he's using Facebook "educationally, appropriately, and ethically IN the classroom."

The Unquiet Library: Creekview High School Media Center (tinyurl.com/1956sc)

Creekview High, in Canton, Georgia, probably has one of the most active K-12 library sites on Facebook. It's a totally public site that serves as a portal for news about books, links to interesting articles, photos about library events, and much more. Teacher librarians Buffy Hamilton and Ruth Fleet have made the site a part of a large lineup of social media, including a library blog and wiki, Delicious bookmarks, Twitter account, Flickr photos, even its own YouTube channel. (Get links to all of those components at tinyurl.com/15xy3j.) It's a great example of how all of these tools can be integrated.

On the Facebook page, students can get information on new books, links to interesting articles that deal with reading or technology or social media,

photos of events, and links to interviews with authors. It's a running stream of news and events that's easily accessible to the millions who use Facebook. But even more, the site serves as a great meeting point for librarians from all over the world who want to share ideas and give feedback.

The key is that social media is a part of the lives of the librarians who run the site. "I try to model these values in my practice as I am constantly tapping into my personal learning network for strategies and ideas to help my students and teachers tap into the power of the dizzying changes in the information landscape," says Hamilton (cited in Valenza, 2009).

Figure 9.3 The Unquiet Library: Creekview High School Media Center



A NING FOR ALL PASSIONS

Despite the continued explosion of Facebook's popularity, it's still not a site that many K–12 schools allow through their filters. (MySpace rarely makes the cut either.) But if you want a Facebook-like environment to deliver some of your curriculum and teach some social networking skills as well, there is an alternative: Ning.com.

Briefly, Ning allows you to create your own free social networking site around whatever topic you want, complete with personal profiles, photos, video links, groups, discussions, blogs, and more. (We'll dig into those details in a bit.) For educators, the best part about a Ning site is that it's totally self-contained—meaning all of that sharing and posting happens under one roof, and it can be totally private only to those whom you want to participate. Teachers who create Ning sites have total administrative control over who can gain access to the site and, to some degree, the extent of their participation there.

You can do a great deal from a classroom perspective with Ning. It's a great environment for students to test out their writing skills for a dedicated audience, and the many ways in which members can comment and interact provide some great opportunities to discuss the ethics and safety that go along with connecting online. Class portfolios are almost a natural outgrowth of long-term Ning use as students add their best practice artifacts, and it can be a great place to collect and link to resources on the Web.

While there aren't a lot of downsides to Ning, it's not perfect. First, you can't share individual blog posts or other artifacts publicly; the site you create is either all private or all public. (You can, however, make it so the site is public but only approved members can change it, much like the "public" setting on wikis we discussed a couple of chapters back.) Second, the Ning interface can get a bit overwhelming as more and more content gets added. There are lots of different apps that you can drop into your profile page, for instance, everything from games to music players to photo editors. It doesn't take long for the navigation to get confusing, so think carefully (and teach your kids to do the same) when adding elements. Third, like Facebook, the Ning terms of service restricts the use of the sites to members that are over the age of 13, which means this is primarily a tool for seventh through twelfth graders. Fourth, if you do set up a private Ning, you lose the ability to subscribe to RSS feeds coming out of the site. Finally, unless you go through the process of requesting they are removed from your education-related site, Google Ads will appear on the homepage. (You'll find the step-by-step process of requesting removal at tinyurl.com/5d8tca.)

Despite all of that, Ning sites are cropping up just about everywhere online, and that includes a great many dedicated to education. You'll find a long list of them on the Social Networks in Education wiki (tinyurl.com/2qu8p8). Many of these sites are being used to connect teachers around their own interests and passions, and the number of members of such sites range from a couple of dozen to over a couple of thousand. The mother of them all is Classroom20.com, a Ning site that was started by educator/consultant Steve Hargadon just two years ago that at this writing has attracted over 25,000 members from around the globe. While all of those folks aren't currently active

on the site, a normal day can see upward of 100 interactions, everything from posting to individual blogs, scheduling events, and viewing videos. Discussions on the site are organized by different tools, curricular subjects, or areas of conversation, such as “administration” or “gifted” or “parents,” for example. There’s a connection to be made here for just about any educator, providing they don’t get too overwhelmed by the scale.

One step down in size from Classroom20 and one step up in focus is the “English Companion Ning” (tinyurl.com/8g7xu3) where about 5,000 or so English teacher types share ideas and experiences about teaching with technology, poetry round tables, writing portfolios, and more. It’s a pretty vibrant, cooperative space. (A quick search will find you a Ning for every discipline, by the way, as well as every passion. I especially like the Book Marketing Ning for, um, obvious reasons. As always, be careful what you search for, as not all Nings are as upstanding as the ones cited here.)

For a smaller, more focused, “community” feel, you might try the “Seedlings” Ning site (tinyurl.com/mamt3r), which was created for listeners of the bimonthly “Seedlings Podcast” hosted by Maine educators Bob Sprankle, Cheryl Oakes, and Alice Barr. With a little over 300 members, you get a real sense of community, of folks genuinely interested in one another and the topics they are exploring. Not that that doesn’t happen on the larger sites, but it’s especially apparent here. (And, besides that, the Seedlings Ning is just plain old pretty in its design.)

NING IN THE CLASSROOM

It shouldn’t be too hard here to see the potential for Ning sites in the classroom or for a school community. In fact, a lot of teachers and administrators are already pretty far down the road to making Ning a valued part of their practice, including not just students and teachers but parents and community members as well. Here are a few examples of what Nings can do.

The ISA Internship Program—Ms. Moorman’s Virtual Classroom (tinyurl.com/lv6qm7)

The International School of the Americas in San Antonio has every student do a 120-hour “career exploration” internship before graduation, and in fall of 2008, teacher Honor Moorman stepped into the coordinator position. Her first question was how to bring together all of these students each working in different places with different schedules so they could share experiences, reflect on their work, and support one another in the process. The obvious answer? Ning.

The ISA Internship Ning had two goals at its inception. First, Honor was “trying to create a virtual classroom . . . where students could converse and collaborate, and where I could support and enrich their learning. Second, I was hoping to enhance the Internship curriculum in a way that would help prepare students for the literacy demands of the twenty-first century” (Moorman, 2009, p. 6). To her credit, she spent a great deal of time preparing students for this work by discussing the potentials and pitfalls of social networking in education, and she even co-constructed a separate Acceptable Use Policy for the site with her students. Even so, it took some time for students to warm up to the site, as many of them saw it as time away from their more friendship-based connections.

What you’ll see on the site’s homepage (which is open to the public) is a pretty regular thread of blog posts and discussions that speak to the challenges and excitement that internships of this type can bring. Students gather in groups around their specific areas of interest, and there is a great mix of the social connections that these networks facilitate and also the learning that can happen when a group of students with a similar focus begins to exchange ideas in an online space.

St. Joe H20 (tinyurl.com/ldgwkb)

Sean Nash set up his Ning for his Marine Biology students in St. Josephs, Missouri, two years ago to build conversations about the subject and to invite experts in from places that were actually near an ocean. One such expert, author Osha Gray Davidson, became an integral part of the class discussion, at one point even sending a 350-million-year-old piece of coral to one of Sean’s students who had written compellingly about endangered coral species on his Ning blog. The results of these types of interactions have been remarkable.

“Current and future students now see our site as a living community that connects former and future students as well as a growing lists of experts in the field,” Sean writes. “No longer do our students feel like they are in a one-way relationship with a textbook, or a two-way relationship with their teacher. They see the site as a hub of communication that connects the best parts of the past with the growing future of our program” (S. Nash, personal communication, July 10, 2009).

The students use the discussion forums to ask and answer questions, the blogs to reflect on their reading, and they add value to the site by sharing photos or videos they find that are relevant to their learning about marine biology. And in doing so, they’ve created a real sense of community. It’s changed the way Sean approaches his own practice.

“Now my students never really “leave” our program; they are all just a click away from future interactions in a way that moves us together forward

as a learning community,” Sean says. “I love the ability to ‘steer’ less and ‘suggest’ more as a classroom teacher. This tool helps me to feel empowered as a leader of student learning and less as a solitary sage dispensing knowledge” (S. Nash, personal communication, July 10, 2009).

The best part? The entire Ning is public, so you can explore it on your own. Sean has taken great measures to teach his students how to comport themselves in a public space. “We work in public for a reason,” Sean says.

ArtSnacks (tinyurl.com/yvmcjh)

So what if you want to start a Ning to connect kids and teachers from around the world around a particular idea or passion? Well, that’s exactly what Kansas teacher Kevin Honeycutt has done with the ArtSnacks Ning site. An early member of the Classroom20 community, Kevin decided two years ago to create a site that would allow teachers and kids to work together to create art. The first step after creating the site was to video about 100 mini lessons on drawing various animals, symbols, historical places, and more and make them easily accessible for members to use to draw their own versions and then post those back to the site. “When creating lessons my aim is to integrate vocabulary and standards-based facts into the lessons,” Kevin writes (personal communication, July 12, 2009). “I asked teachers to request lessons they needed and to include vocabulary and facts they would like reinforced. For example, when they draw the pond, they hear about ecosystems and the water cycle” (K. Honeycutt, personal communication, July 12, 2009). A great idea, I think.

Today, there are over 2,200 members from over 50 countries on the site who have posted over 11,500 pieces of art for others to view. One of the best parts of the site is that it has about a one-to-one ratio of teachers to students. And as the interest has expanded, so have the offerings. Kids can sign up for live lessons in voice, piano, and guitar through the site by combining Skype and Ustream to create individualized learning channels. Elementary teachers use the network as a center for individual art experiences for their learners and as an extension for curricular concepts. It’s even become a place where dropout recovery programs send students for credit recovery.

While it hasn’t been easy, Kevin has been amazed with the result. School filters have prevented many teachers and students from taking part, and there’s no question that maintaining a “walled garden” site where membership is by request takes time and attention. Still, it has been worth it. “I’ve been a first-hand witness to the power of social learning networks to foster real, engaged learning,” Kevin says. “It’s been incredible to watch and be a part of” (personal communication, July 12, 2009).

SETTING UP YOUR NING SITE

It shouldn't come as any surprise at this point that setting up your own personal Ning site is pretty easy. The hard part comes in the management, depending on how many members you admit and the things that you're doing there. As always, I highly suggest you explore Ning's potentials on someone else's site first before flipping the switches on for yourself. With all of the Ning sites for educators talking about their own uses of Ning, you'll get a log of valuable Ning formation and experience in next to no time. And, you'll more easily be able to make the compelling case to the decision makers in your school who do the filtering. So, don't skip that step.

When you're ready, just go to Ning.com and start the creation process by picking a name for your social network and choosing an address. (Remember to think this through carefully just like you did your Blogger address—you can't change it once you choose. Also, don't forget to give this address to the person who runs the filter at your school; in many cases, Ning sites are blocked, but individual sites can be opened up by the address). Next, enter your name, e-mail, set your password, put in your birthday, read the Terms of Service (not) and click "Sign Up." (Remember, you can create as many Ning sites as you like.) On the next page, you get to fill in some more detail. Again, think through the information you add here, even though you will be able to change any or all of it later (even your network name.) And don't worry too much about the public/private option at this point. We'll get back to that in a second.

Now comes the fun part—building the look of your site. As I said earlier, Ning sites can get pretty crowded pretty fast, so I would start with less and build it as you get a feel for the needs of the community. To "add features" just drag and drop the modules on the setup grid. (By the way, if you are good at CSS and HTML, you can create your own personal look later. If you don't know what those stand for, forget I mentioned it.) Personally, I definitely want the "Activity," "Forum," "Members," and "Groups" prominently on my page. You may want to leave the "Photos" and "Video" features but move them to the side. But other than that, I'd start with everything else off the page. (Remember, it's easy to add it all back in later.) Just a reminder: You won't be able to remove the ads from your page at this point. You'll have to contact Ning directly once you're set up and request their removal if you can prove you are an education site. Or you can purchase away the ads for \$25 a month.

When you are finished with the form, click "Next" and you'll have the chance to choose a template for your site. Again, if you know some code (or have a geeky 14-year-old in the house), you can customize your look in a lot of ways. But there are over 50 choices available, so you should find at least one to your liking. When you've chosen, click "Launch" and your site is ready to go.

Now here are a couple of things to do right away before you start adding pictures and videos and other content. First, click on “Manage,” which will be toward the top somewhere depending on the template you chose. Then find the icon that says “Network Privacy” under the “Your Members” section. There, you want to make your choice as to who can see what and who can join your site. If it were me, I might consider making a public site where visitors can only see the main page and where I approve all new members before they can join. Yeah, I know, that’s a bit more work than just locking the whole thing down (as in “Private” for “Only Invited People”). But again, I want my kids to have some public face to their work. (As an aside, going back to Ning’s limitations, you might want to keep your site private and publish the best work to a public blog or wiki.)

Remember that despite your best planning and execution, there may be moments when things don’t go as you like. A student may post an inappropriate link or add a comment to a post that isn’t exactly civil. Worse, a student may bully another or threaten harm. While these instances will be rare if you have been vigilant in your own practice and preparation, you have to plan for their occurrence. Hopefully, if they do happen, they’ll be seen as teachable moments and not reasons to shut things down. As Kevin Honeycutt says:

Sometimes a member can do something less than smart but we eventually catch it. Some people feel that even one negative event on a network is a reason to shut it down, but I would offer that when kids cross behavioral lines in schools, we don’t shut them down, we address the issue and try to learn from the experience. In the end, I think we must build online cultures that are self-monitoring. It is obvious to me that this is an area of learning that we must spend time growing. (tinyurl.com/lbmv5)

When you’re done setting the privacy levels, click on the “Feature Controls” icon from the “Manage” page and you’ll find a few more switches to flip depending on your needs. Since you created the site, you are the almost all-powerful site administrator, which means you can ban members, delete posts, set profile questions, and all sorts of other fun stuff. Take the time to explore these powers by clicking through the rest of the sections on the “Manage” page.

Before inviting others to your site, you might want to add some content and spruce the place up a bit. You can start by filling out your profile at “My Page.” Add a picture and some of your best, most impressive thoughts here. (But whatever you do, don’t “Add Apps.” If you click on that link, I take no responsibility for what happens to your site or, for that matter, your livelihood.) From your member page you can also add a blog post, start a discussion, add an event, and all sorts of other fun stuff. Again, take some time to

kick the tires, so to speak, before you add your students or colleagues or parents or the world to your community.

When you're ready to start entertaining, just click "Invite" and start adding e-mail addresses to the form. (If e-mails are a problem there is a screencast with a very cool workaround with Gmail that will let you create the accounts and set the passwords for distributing to your students. It's at tinyurl.com/lw3s7m.) Remember, once you invite all of your students, you're going to have to approve them as well (depending on how you set things up), so expect some e-mails to come your way pretty fast.

Then, let the connecting and learning begin. Show your students how to set up their own member pages and their blogs, go over commenting and sharing, talk about acceptable and responsible use, start some discussions, and get your community to work. If it's appropriate, invite parents, other teachers, and other classrooms into the mix. And don't forget to reflect on your own learning in the process. But whatever you do, don't let anyone click on that "Add Apps" button.