

Introduction

by Mark Gura

Rose first showed me her pioneering work in the use of author websites a few years back when I was preparing to give a keynote presentation for a reading association. I was impressed with the huge potential this approach offered; it immediately clicked for me that this was the very thing for that vast majority of teachers out there who would like to find an easy way to bring technology into their classrooms. Using author websites encourages the use of technology without the usual disincentives: the need for extensive professional development; the need for a significant influx of hardware, software and peripheral devices; and most off-putting, the need to take a major detour from the familiar curriculum that they use with confidence. Using author sites eliminates all that while allowing a new and exciting dimension to be brought into the classroom. I could see these advantages instantly, and apparently so did my “non-techie” audience.

A few years back, before retirement, I was the director of The Office of Instructional Technology for a Department of Education. My responsibility was to provide guidance, resources, instructional support and professional development in the integration of technology across the curriculum. Because of the scope of this mandate, we learned to bypass all resources and practices that didn't resonate strongly with teachers. We avoided resources that required a significant outlay of funds and those that took time to set up. Those that required frequent maintenance were avoided, too. Instead, we turned our attention solely to practices that teachers could adopt within the limiting parameters of their jobs and that offered them real advantages in teaching and learning.

MINIMAL EQUIPMENT AND TECH SKILLS REQUIRED

Author websites, which are *free*, are a perfect low-risk sandpit in which to play, try things out, learn and adopt. Teachers who have access to a working computer with a connection to the Internet already have pretty much all they need to use them. Sure, some of these sites offer media items that may require the download of a plug-in or player (nothing hard to accomplish, just read and follow simple directions), but author sites are generally created by sophisticated webmasters who see their mission as providing clients with a resource that will run on almost anything. Thus, the sites are designed so that even if every item isn't viewed or heard at optimum capacity, they are still displayed at a level that will support their appreciation. Consequently, if a classroom computer runs a relatively up-to-date browser, not necessarily the most recent one, and is supported by a connection that approaches broadband, the overwhelming majority of author websites will deliver their magic just fine.

Assuming that a teacher has some very basic computer and technology skills—like turning the computer on, manipulating a mouse, and opening and closing files—then there are very few things to learn in order to make author websites a centerpiece of instruction. After launching a browser and finding and accessing an author’s website, the rest of the experience requires simply

1. Reading the directions on the website (simple commands like “click here”, “back” and “next”, generally accompanied by arrows or other visual cues)
2. Following those directions
3. Left-clicking a mouse

Really, that’s about it! Of course there are always a few other things that can be done. Author sites can be bookmarked, for instance, and their URLs can be emailed to students, parents or colleagues. But generally, these tasks can also be accomplished with the simplest of commands, developed with the non-technically inclined in mind. These websites are truly part of the new user-friendly digital literacy landscape.

Consequently, whatever professional development is offered relating to the use of author websites has much less to do with the acquisition of technology skills than it does with using the sites’ instructional resources. Staff development in the use of author websites provides a wonderful bonus opportunity to discuss core instructional ideas that have a direct impact on literacy instruction, for example, the value and methodology of author study, the relationship between self-directed reading and writing, and the use of media.

IT’S SAFE

One of the common “yeah, but” one hears about the use of the web as an instructional resource has to do with the fear that somehow websites will put youngsters in jeopardy. And in fact, there are websites with very unwholesome content that we do want to prevent youngsters from visiting. Author websites, however, are generally resources that educators can use with confidence. These sites are authorised by and maintained for professional authors who fully understand the responsibility of keeping them appropriate for their young audience. Furthermore, a preferred manner of using these sites in the classroom is during whole-group instruction, in which the web destination the class visits is controlled by the teacher, who then moderates the students’ experience of exploring it with an eye toward appropriateness and quality.

INSTRUCTION AND CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

When it first became possible to bring the magic of computer technology into the classroom, many eager educators adopted the one-to-one environment—that is, one laptop for every student—as the ideal, exclusively relevant deployment model. Now that the dust is clearing on the classroom tech revolution and we’ve had time to reflect on how it has played out, it is becoming clear that one-to-one, as valuable as it may be in some situations, is just one model among several. In fact, its exclusive deployment throws off the balance of many teaching and learning factors. Think of it this way: in the course of a balanced educational experience, a classroom will have youngsters working independently at times, in small groups at others and at other times still as a unified whole group. The class will toggle back and forth between modalities as the needs of learners shift.

The whole-group mode of instruction is a uniquely valuable approach to classroom technology use. Think about a scenario in which the teacher projects a large image for the whole class to work from, allowing students to view and participate as a group in website navigation decisions. This approach, in which the whole class is able to view the same screen, is far more economical and practical logistically than individual instruction, with the teacher attempting to monitor and scaffold every student's navigation of a site. Anyone who has had the privilege of observing a skilled literacy teacher doing a book walk with a group of primary students will recognise the connection. The teacher holds up a big book for students to admire, a literary talisman that is examined and admired before the book is formally "read" from more traditionally scaled, individual copies. This is very similar to a whole-group activity in which the focus of attention is a single, large image of a website. This approach to classroom technology use can support a range of tech-based activities across the year levels, wherever an author's website has items of high value to offer. It has applicability across the curriculum and at every year level.

Another benefit of this approach, and one that will ensure that teachers see classroom technology use as easy and nonthreatening, is how it relates to classroom management. With the teacher at the mouse of the single display (likely an LCD projector, large-screen monitor or interactive whiteboard), few of the distracting behaviours that can get in the way of the flow of a well-planned lesson are likely to creep in. With the teacher asking for suggestions (by the traditional raising of hands and sharing with the group) about where to navigate the group's attention on the websites being used, or calling individuals up to the mouse to take their turn at control, in no way has the interactivity been compromised. It has simply been adapted to the shared-activity mode of instruction that is a tried-and-true portion of the overall school experience.

WHY THIS BOOK IS IMPORTANT

Even though we are into the third decade of the field of instructional technology, technology integration remains a largely unfulfilled ideal in many schools. With the advent of reasonably priced and easily maintained personal computers, ever increasing access to broadband Internet service and an exploding body of highly valuable web-based content, technology use across the curriculum really should have become the norm by now. Technologies that have positively transformed all realms of intellectual activity outside of education still remain something of an unattainable holy grail inside our classrooms.

All who weigh in on the subject—informed practitioner, policy maker or plain old concerned citizen—agree that the time for pointing to pockets of success or examples of integration models is long past. So much work has been done in this field; it can no longer be said that we are still trying to figure out how to adapt technology for education. Search the web! The evidence and knowledge is there and in such quantities as to quell any doubts or questions.

Teachers from university departments of education to P–12 classrooms have called for the inclusion of technology as an important part of teaching and learning in the 21st century. A glance at the websites of important professional organisations such as the U.S. National Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association and the U.S. National Council of Teachers of Mathematics show a solidarity of interest among leading educators in improving students' proficiency in the new literacies of information and communication technology.

We understand that the use of technology will make the school experience more relevant for youngsters growing up in the current intellectual environment, fostering

year and age levels. And while some features and components are similar to those found on Carle's site (e.g. biographical information) older students can be engaged in ways that are appropriate for their age group. Furthermore, these sites introduce other types of content and activities especially for older students: character education through reflection on the qualities of heroes in Barron's case, and in the case of Blume, social activism and the need for it as reflected in her concern and writing about censorship.

Barron is a juvenile trade book author whose broad spectrum of works present themes of fantasy, adventure, nature, individual heroism and environmental concerns. The purposeful design of his author site makes it one of the key ways he communicates with his growing audience. The site and its many resources can provide much for in-depth implementation of the reading and writing workshop on a middle school level.

TRY THIS WITH YOUR CLASS

Activity 3.1 Getting the Word Out: Middle School Authors Also Write for Young Children

Years 4–8, Gifted and Talented

Many middle school students are unaware that some of their favourite authors (e.g. T. A. Barron, www.tabarron.com; Judy Blume, www.judyblume.com; Gary Soto, www.garysoto.com) also write for younger readers.

1. Challenge students who explore these and other sites to identify so-called teen authors who also write for younger kids.
2. Have students compile an annotated list of such authors and their titles in a poster or document that can be posted online.
3. Arrange for them to share this list with younger siblings and peers, primary level librarians, parents and teachers.
4. Encourage students to send their annotated poster or document to the authors.

Students who spread the word in this way are also using research and functional literacy skills to authentically expand authors' readership and to share the wealth of literacy with a set of new, younger readers—a functional and informational literacy win-win-win.

MAPPING OUT READING AND WRITING WORKSHOP CONNECTIONS

True to Barron's comment about his website being "a travel brochure for the imagination", his works are full of maps. Why would he be involved so intensely with maps if he is primarily famous for his fantasy and adventure stories for middle year students? A major focus currently in middle school writing classrooms is to engage students in studying travel brochures and guide books as reading genres. Ironically, if Barron's work was non-fiction, he would provide perfect examples and models for informational brochure assignments for middle school students. The next reading-through-writing step of the process, after examining and analysing examples, is to have students produce their own informa-

The audio posting/podcasting process includes

- creating the raw recording
- editing and saving the recording in the proper file format (MP3 in the case of podcasts)
- uploading the recording to a server somewhere that will accept it

Once recorded, the podcast can easily be linked to a class blog or website or be burned to CDs for distribution to students, parents and peers. If it is a true podcast, RSS technology will push it out from the podcast directory/host server. If the more applicable and practical *audio post* term applies, which may be one or several recordings, distributing the URL of the recording or embedding the URL as a link on a website is the perfect approach. For a complete and easy-to-understand collection of information about podcast technology, curriculum suggestions, and classroom setup and management tips on classroom podcasting, see *Podcasting for Teachers* (King & Gura, 2009).

TRY THIS WITH YOUR CLASS

Activity 6.3 Researching Class Author Study Podcasts

Years 4–8

Searching online using keywords like “student book talk podcast” will turn up numerous examples of schools and classes that record book talk-oriented activities digitally and then post them online for others to appreciate and learn from.

One such effort is R. A. Mitchell Elementary School Podcast Central (www1.gcs.k12.al.us/~podcast/mitchell.html), which contains many audio files. Another example is the website of Bob Sprankle (www.bobsprankle.com/blog), a teacher, who recorded his year three and four students’ literature discussions and posted them as part of his popular Room 208 podcast series.

By acquiring Skype (free Internet calling and chatting program; www.skype.com) and its Pamela recording application (low cost but not free; www.pamela.biz/en/) interviews can be conducted over the Internet and recorded. The recordings done in Pamela (or similar software) can be edited and then used as part of an audio post or podcast. Remote interviewing may prove an invaluable platform for many literacy-rich activities that classes engage in as they produce content for their author sites.

Audio Plus Images

Audio items can be enhanced with accompanying graphics. It is becoming increasingly common for established software applications to be reissued with the capability to pair these two functions. The finished product will show the images coordinated with the sound on the screen of a computer, an iPod or another MP3/MP4 player manufactured with this capability. In effect, this pairing produces something similar to a slide show that is accompanied by a soundtrack.

Photo Sharing

Free photo-sharing sites can give student photos (or drawings saved in similar file format, such as JPG) a web presence (see Figures 6.5 and 6.6). A link to students’ online