

Teacher as Network Administrator

There are many different metaphors that people use to describe classrooms and schools. Some talk about classrooms being gardens where students flourish and grow. Others talk about schools being factories where students are the product we are trying to refine, with tests being the quality control component. Which one we choose depends on what we believe about education and how we structure what we do in our classrooms.

We also have an entirely different set of metaphors for what teaching is. Over the last few years, the two that have worn a rapid path towards cliché are teachers as “guide on the side,” and teacher as “sage on the stage.” While good intentioned, I don’t believe that either of these captures what teaching today can be about. I like to think about teacher as network administrator.

Many people panic when I tell them this, thinking that either I am piling more jobs on already desperately over worked classroom teachers, or that I want to put school network specialists out of job. Neither can be further from the truth. When I talk about teacher as network administrator, it is not about the specialized type of computer knowledge that maintaining a network requires. What I am talking about is a particular idea about how a learning environment can be structured to best take advantage of the tremendous amount of knowledge that is present in all of the different spaces we have access to.

A network is an open and malleable set of connections between people and information spaces. Just as our mind is a continuously evolving set of connections between concepts, so our students and their learning can become placed at the centre of a personal learning network which they construct with our help for their maximum benefit. Helping students to gain the skills they require to construct these networks for learning, evaluate their effectiveness, and work within a fluid structure is a massive change in how the business of classrooms is usually structured.

CONSTRUCTION

Constructing a personal network of learners is something that can be difficult for students to do. Possibly never having worked in these ways in any of their past educational experience, they can quickly become bewildered and lost without our guidance. We want them to find things they are interested in? We want them to help locate information on the things we are studying in class? We want them to find writers with interesting voices? Often used to being “spoon – fed” information from their teachers, students are sometimes at

a loss about how to begin a process like this. For this reason, I've found that it is often best to give students a starter set of online resources which we want them to subscribe to. Choose carefully. What kinds of information are important enough that you are going to require that your students read them each time they go online? Another thing to think about is what you wish to emphasize in these subscriptions. Do you want your students to have examples of good writing to look to? Do you want them to look at an issue from a global perspective? Possibly you want them to subscribe to a blog about a certain topic or issue you will be covering in your classroom soon and are using the blogs to give the students some background knowledge on this topic?

The ability to have your students access the absolutely most recent information on an issue and have it available to them for basically free is a radical change for classrooms. Multiple sources, multiple voices, constantly updated. The potential benefits for classrooms are absolutely enormous.

Once students have some experience with the feeds you are providing them with, you can open it up to them, asking them to find resources on certain topics. I always require students to publish the resources they have found, allowing others students in the class to have access to their finds as well.

EVALUATION

Once they have experience locating information that is valuable and acceptable, I meet with students on an ongoing basis, asking them about their networks and about what they are finding the most helpful and the most valuable. Anyone can fill up an RSS aggregator such as Bloglines. It is a much more difficult and meaningful task for students to reflect on the effectiveness of their networks and question themselves about its purpose and content. Why have you chosen those blogs to subscribe to? What have you learned from them since we last met? What do you know about the author? Have you left any comments for the author or have you been in contact with them with your thoughts or questions?

CHANGING NETWORKS

I once had a student who was so excited by the prospect of having a Bloglines account and having the ability to aggregate the voices of learners from around the globe that she promptly found over forty student blogs to subscribe to. By the end of the week she came to me in class and told me that having this account was the worst thing that had happened to her in a long time because it was getting to be an incredible burden already keeping up with the content that that was flowing towards her.

Having an aggregator is a change for most students who have never even heard of RSS. They get excited by the opportunity of gathering information on their own and by the idea of hooking up with students in other classes around the globe. But the river of information can quickly become overwhelming. Students need to move themselves slowly into the information stream, starting with the few resources we give them, and then adding others as they need them. But most importantly, students need to learn that their network needs to be fluid and will change over time.

A blog they needed for a science topic will no longer be needed once the unit is finished and can be safely discarded unless they have a special interest in the topic and wish to keep it. Networks are meant to be fluid, changeable, and malleable. In this age of information abundance, resources need to be carefully tended and cultivated, but can also be left behind when our attention needs to pass elsewhere. If we don't do this pruning of our network, the information we aggregate will simply become overwhelming. Questions for students at this stage may be: Why do you still have that subscription? What is it contributing to your learning? What is the last thing you learned from that feed? Should it be removed?

Schools used to be fountains of knowledge where students came to get information. Schools had books, homes probably had few. Teachers were educated, while most people in society were not. In that time, teachers were certainly the "sage on the stage" who possibly knew much more than the general public and who had access to many books where answers could be found. But our times are different. Compared to homes that have hundreds of television channels, satellite radios, and high-speed internet connections, the school may be the place where students have access to the least amount of information during their day.

We do students and society no favours if we continue to educate children for ages of information scarcity, teaching them to rely on outdated textbooks and on the single point of view of the teacher. Instead, classrooms need to become information portals, and teachers network administrators who can help students to create and evaluate a personal learning network for themselves.

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