

PARENTS LEAGUE OF NEW YORK

Review

2011

Essential Articles on Parenting and Education

Closing the Door on the 19th-century Classroom

James Tracy, *Headmaster, Cushing Academy*

Imagine this scene: Hundreds of secondary students gather into a chapel to talk about global health issues with three of the world's foremost scholars on the subject—one from Oxford University, one from Columbia University, and one from Boston University. Only one of the scholars is physically present at the assembly. The other two are visible on large screens: they are Skyping from Europe and New York City. Nearby, another hundred students have gathered with teachers in the library, where the discussion from the chapel is being telecast on monitors. In the library, there are several different groups dedicated to distinct projects. Foreign students from the ESL classes are texting each other at rapid speed in their native languages to help understand and explain what is being discussed during the assembly. Students in the Academic Support program are texting interactively amongst themselves and with AS teachers to take notes about the salient points of the presentation, which will then constitute the school's official memorandum of the event. Another knot of students is working with teachers to tweet in real time to the outside world about the discussion taking place among the scholars and students. Still another group in the library is blogging in real time as the discussion in the chapel unfolds and, from their shared blog, they are generating questions that are then selected and posed to the panelists by students in the chapel itself. Meanwhile, the entire event is being videotaped to be placed as open-source material on YouTube.

Hundreds of students and three foremost scholars talk, Skype, text, tweet, blog, videotape—and put it all on YouTube.

This scene actually transpired at our school as part of the University of Oxford-Cushing Academy Discussion Series about major global issues of the 21st century. This one, our third, was the culmination of a year of interdisciplinary reading, teaching and learning about major trends in global

health that took place across the school curriculum. By all accounts, students prepared diligently and enthusiastically for this discussion, were fully engaged in its intellectual content as it transpired, and acquitted themselves with impressive questions and comments throughout the event. The interchange was substantive, interactive and dynamic. And it was all made possible by an intelligent use of 21st-century technology.

A Thoughtful Application of Technology

As some readers of this article may know, our school has been much in the news for its decision to fully digitize its school library. I think that what I've described above exemplifies the value of having done so. In the past, we would never have been able to fit so many students and teachers in the library, where they were actively assisted throughout the event by librarians helping students to do ancillary research in real time on topics and

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statistics that were being discussed by the panelists. This interactive space, where discussion could take place without being disruptive to the audience in the chapel—but, rather, could augment that experience—is the end result of the multi-media tools we have built into the library with funds that would otherwise be spent updating the outdated books that were on the shelves.

I could give many other examples of how this shift has resulted in substantive, real-time learning that engages our students in new and exciting ways. It is also worth noting that, in the example given above, the change to our library allowed students to individuate the learning experience to their distinct needs—some worked on their note-taking skills while others focused on their English language acquisition. Some students also wore earpieces that allowed them to talk only amongst their peer group spread out in the library to focus on particular projects.

Also, rather than isolating or distracting them, a thoughtful application of technology actually brought the students into a more focused and interactive engagement with the ideas being presented and gave them a sense of ownership of the questions and information being presented in the discussion—including fact-checking panelists' comments in real time.

The 21st-century Student

Look at it this way: Today's high school student spends eighteen hours every weekday living in the 21st century—texting, on average, dozens of times per day. Too often, though, our schools drop them into a 19th-century classroom for six hours each day and try to convince the students that this is actually the most important time of their daily experience. Is it any wonder that the students have difficulty seeing how this is so?

Now, there are assuredly good reasons why educators feel the school experience is crucial. As an educator, I _____
certainly agree that the skills and values we impart during the school day are essential for the students' success—skills such as content knowledge, critical thinking, and cogency of communication. Yet there is no reason that these skills can't be inculcated within an educational experience that feels more like the 21st-century world our students actually inhabit and that utilizes more dynamically the technological tools and methods they use in their everyday lives.

Today's high school students spend eighteen hours a day living in the 21st century.

Why drop them into a 19th-century classroom for the remaining six?

Students today are contributing content to the internet in record numbers. It is natural for them to flourish when invited by teachers to co-create classroom content. Rather than force students into being passive recipients of information, our teachers are inviting the students to help create interactive presentations of difficult chapters for use by the entire student body; the students, who then act as co-creators of classroom content, now take a new sense of agency to their studies and, by all accounts, spend more time than ever on their homework.

This also allows students to show off their technical savvy. They often enjoy teaching the teachers how to build from the latest interactive software. In fact, we are exploring a new model that, while it retains teachers' authority in the classrooms as content guides, invites students to be the real authorities over technological access to information. This frees teachers from feeling the need to stay ahead of the students' mastery of ever-changing technology—which can be futile, anyway.

Students also are used to “swarming” (on Facebook and elsewhere) and are immersed in a virtual gaming world. Accordingly, we are exploring tools with which students can learn and engage more collectively, such as blogging together about a discussion or voting on a series of questions about a global topic (with the results displayed immediately), as they did during a recent assembly. We also are exploring how to build interactive learning games.

The Educator’s Task: Engaging Learners

I share the concerns many have expressed about the dystopia toward which digital technology might lead us. It is certainly of concern to any thoughtful parent or educator that today’s students might be more prone to distractibility or become isolated in a frivolous virtual reality. This does not mean, though, that we should resist the introduction of such technology into our classrooms. The systemic spread of these technologies is inevitable. Our job as educators is to try to create curricular models that make the best use of these tools, showing students how to live lives of engaged learning at the highest levels of human experience and expression using the very tools, skills and learning styles that are most natural to their generation. At Cushing Academy, that is precisely what is guiding our library initiative and, much more broadly, our entire 21st-Century Leadership initiative.

James Tracy is Headmaster of Cushing Academy, a day and boarding school for Grades 9 through 12 in Ashburnham, Massachusetts.