Using SKYPE in the Classroom

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May 9, 2011

**Introduction**

The National Education Technology Plan was developed to allow the United States to lead the word in college graduates by 2020. To achieve this goal we are asked to focus on five components of learning powered by technology. These components are learning, assessment, teaching, infrastructure, and productivity (US Department of Education, 2010). This plan is used to develop our state and school policies that ask us to prepare our students for the 21st century. Through different technology tools we are able to assist students to reach these goals. An excellent tool that allows us to have instruction focus on these learning components is Skype. Skype can be used for social interaction in the classroom that can involve problem solving and high level thinking skills. The possibilities of Skype in the classroom are endless from virtual field trips to helping an ill classmate at home. In the learning aspect of the National Technology Plan it is written that all leaners have experiences in and out of school that prepare them for our globally networked society. (US Department of Education, 2010, p. 23).

**Student Learners**

 Before discussing a specific tool of technology it is important to discuss the types of learners that needs should be met. The current student population has different unique traits that must be considered when teaching in the classroom. Generation Y students are also known as the “trophy kids” have been exposed to technology from birth. These students are in constant contact with the internet (Loy, 2010). Through a survey completed by World One Research they found that 86% of Generation Y students found that devices, such as laptops, PDAs, and mobile phones make people significantly more productive. They concluded that they prefer to be in front of a computer screen rather than reading from a book (World One Research, 2009). This generation learns from digital language because they have been immersed in it since birth, from electronic media, computers, video games, and cell phones (Loy, 2010). Studies show that they learn better through visuals than text (World One Research, 2009). This generation use technology as their main source of communication (Loy, 2010). Skype is web-powered software that helps students to accelerate by making conversations and interactions possible. It is both visual and oral, so it provides different learning modules that meet the needs of our Generation Y learner (SKYPE, 2011).

 Teachers often complain that these learners do not focus and it is hard to teach reading when the students will not read. The average student spends around 30 minutes interacting with books. Students are now driven by opportunities to interact with the peers in and out of school (Ferriter, 2010).

**SKYPE**

Skype is free software that can be downloaded to your computer. It connects computers together to allow free telephone calls. You may use chat or video conferencing. However, to use it in the classroom there are some requirements. Your system must have a higher bandwidth connection. My current school system did not have the bandwidth connection to use Skype. However, we have found that by going across the street to the Town Hall we are able to use a wireless connection that has the bandwidth connection to use Skype. The computer needs to have a desktop microphone, speakers, and a web camera. To use it in the classroom it is suggested that you have a white board for display and an LCD projector if video conferencing with a class. Skype allows students to communicate freely without text or typing whether with students down the street or across the world (SKYPE, 2011).

In looking at different teachers’ perspectives of video chat tools a study was done to compare teacher perspectives and uses in the classroom. Skype received excellent ratings and have very few drawbacks. It ranked at the top of the list for audio and video chat. Participants commented on the features that allowed for landline calls as well as PC to PC calls. However, the landline calls are not free but are offered at a low rate. Teachers were especially impressed with how they could receive text messages that were sent when the user is offline. When chatting in groups they liked being able to put on partner on hold while answering another audio call. One of the dislikes was the occasional poor quality of sound and the small size of the video screen for your own chat window. These study participants believed that Skype would have many benefits for the language learner (Eroz-Tuga & Sadler, 2009).

In 2010 it was reported that Skype had 124 million users and in the first 6 months of 2010 these users placed approximately 95 billion calls. Skype has many advanced features that could be beneficial for educators, such as screen sharing. It is argued that Skype is not as powerful and does not has as many interactive features as Ellunimate but Skype is a free program and has more users. It also has more simple features that allow teachers to feel comfortable using this technology in their classroom (Eaton, 2010).

**Features of Skype**

 Skype is able to offer many easy to use features but it is recommended that you practice using these tools before teaching a lesson with a class. This was you are more comfortable and are able to use these tools with ease. Skype is an excellent tool to help teachers and students build skills to use more sophisticated technologies.

 Skype allows you to make conference calls with up to six users at a time. It also has a chat function that you can use while in an audio or video call. If the connection breaks up this feature is very useful. When you are on a call you are able to send someone a file. The party on the other end can open it as soon as they receive it. This will allow you to discuss it during your call. Teachers can use this to share activities and lessons with students during a lesson. One of the most used features is the screen sharing which allows users to share a portion or the entire screen with others while on a call. The screen sharing is only activated once a call is in place (SKYPE, 2011).

**Enhancing Teacher Productivity**

 A crucial way to use Skype is for teacher benefit for professional development. With the current budget cuts, professional development is one of the first things to go. Skype is a less expensive alternative and there are many different possibilities. With the new

San Jose State University uses Skype to talk to colleagues around the world. For professional development for pre-service teachers they are able to record guest speakers from different colleges and then turn them into podcast to put on classroom websites (Hargadon, 2010) .

When teachers think of social networking negative perceptions often occur, they think of “my space” and “facebook”. They tend to worry because of the safety of the sites and reputation of wasted time. However, social networking has developed due to Web 2.0. It is believed that it is beneficial for educators because they are able to collaborate with colleagues. Through blogs and wikis teachers can collaborate and learn from each other. Skype enhances this because peers are able to talk online about best practices and share ideas.

Through this educational networking we have access to professional development 24-7. We are able to participate in conference calls or discussion at a convenient time. Through educational networking we can participate in the events that will actually make a difference in our teaching and will help or students (Hargadon, 2010).

Skype has developed a program for teachers to connect with one another. You are able to register with your Skype account to “Skype in the Classroom”. Currently, they have approximately 12,000 teachers signed up. Through this you can search for teachers that teach the same grade level and subject and share ideas. Each teacher member is listed with the grade level they teach and their specialty. There is a member-only directory to find other professionals that can offer you help or that you would like to help. Once you find a person to connect with you add that person to your Skype account as a contact. A resource page has been developed for educators to share their ideas of how to use Skype in the classroom (SKYPE in the Classroom, 2011).

 Skype can also be used for professional organizations to work on different projects. Media Specialist that are members of the American Library Association are now able to talk to members online to discuss upcoming events. Different committees are having virtual Skype meetings to save money on travel (Messner, 2009).

**Virtual Author or Expert Visits and Field Trips**

On teacher developed a Skype project while attending a teacher workshop at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. She was able to see the statues of the delegates to the 1787 Constitutional Convention and heard the stories about them. She knew that she wanted her students to experience this and money was an issue so they could not do a field trip. A video chat was arranged with the director of education at the museum. He was able to walk the students through the museum and allow them to take the tour without having them leave the school.

A 7th grade science teacher coordinated a similar experience while attending the National Space Symposium in Colorado Springs. This teacher was able to watch astronauts give presentations and share things that they used in space. He decided to broadcast four live lessons to his students. At the end of this study one student handed him a card that said, “I was never really that into science before but now I want to be the first person to walk on Mars.” This type of excitement normal only happens on a fieldtrip but students were able to see things in their classroom (Langhorst, 2009)

Many publishers are now starting to experiment with Skype. Author, Jerry Spinelli just completed a Skype tour for his book *Love, Stargirl*. Many authors are looking forward to this paradigm switch because they are able to stay home with their families and talk online at their convenience in their own homes. Virtual tours are cutting down on the cost of travel expenses. Although it does not replace an actual author visiting your school, publishers are now encouraging authors to begin this journey with their readers (Rosen, 2009).

In Austin, Texas high school students were able to visit with Cynthia Leitich after completing a unit on one of her books. Students were able to ask the author many upper level questions to discuss how she developed her characters and what inspired her. The teacher felt that it was very rewarding for the students especially the shy students because they were more incline to ask questions. One student felt that this is a wonderful tool because they are already familiar with the instant messaging and feel comfortable. Many schools are finding that they are having trouble with bandwidth and security concerns. They are then finding other alternatives such as restricted access and only allowing assigned students to scribe (Foote, 2008).

Most authors have an online advertisement with websites and email links; this also allows you to email to discuss possible Skype visits with your students. Some authors have agreed to do Skype visits for a twenty minute sessions for free but then will also complete in-depth conversations for a cost. School Library Journal has developed a site which allows teachers and librarians to connect with these authors and learn the steps to use Skype for author visits. These types of programs are allowing us to have book discussions and to inspire reading and writing. One teacher suggest that she has had the best success with morning author visits because it is easier to avoid high internet usage times which appear to slow the connection down with Skype (Messner, 2009).

One of the biggest complains from teachers are that they only have one computer in their classroom. With Skype you only need one computer and a projector. Music teachers are now starting to contact famous composers, professional musicians, or college music majors to talk on Skype with their students. Teachers are also encouraged to share biographical information about composers and research them. If available these people are also able to be contacted through SKYPE (Olson, 2010).

**Classroom Project Collaboration**

Colleges across the United States are using it to work with students. An associate professor of Russian at George Washington University feels that banning Skype on his university network would be like “cutting off his right arm”. The professor fell that Skype plays a huge role in the future of higher education for foreign language programs. Dr. Robin uses Skype to talk to students from Russia. This allows students to converse. Another professor at Dickinson has his students in Japanese program call students in Japan twice a month in a computer lab. The first ten minutes they speak English and then the second ten minutes they speak Japanese. This allows the students to learn from each other (Woo, 2006).

English teacher Hagit Goldstein in Israel and Spanish teacher Allison Baugher in the United States were currently working together on ePals so their classes could discuss their different cultures. Through Skype they were able to see each of the classes perform a dance. The students from Israel were all in uniform and shared Israeli dances while the United States students performed hip hop dances. This then led to online conversations between the two classes. The teachers felt that this brought the world into the classrooms and it was more rewarding then just looking at emails and pictures (Schaffhauser, 2009).

An excellent resource and lesson is turning the students into global curriculum researchers. Some teachers suggest that at the beginning of the year to write down the ten most difficult areas of their curriculum and hand it to the students. Allow them to find out how other teachers are teaching this unit and find resources. From this list of resources from the students you are able to contact other teachers and experts to help you in planning units. Any unit can have a Skype visitor. There are so many experts out there and through Skype they can come into your classroom (Schaffhauser, 2009).

**Conclusion**

 Technology rapidly changes and is reshaping teaching and learning in schools. Generation Y uses technology as their main form of communication. Students are required to use digital media to work collaboratively and Skype allows this to be done at a distance. Skype takes communication one step further by Even with a small budget Skype can be incorporated in the classroom and the possibilities are endless. You just have to take the chance and remember that it might not always go as planned but you learn from each experience. You have to be creative and spend time searching. Using Skype for teacher collaboration is one of the first steps to become comfortable with the software. This allows you to learn from others while collaborating. Generation Y students learn best through technology and it is important to meet their ever growing needs. Skype is an excellent resource for field trips and author visits. There are always experts, students, authors, and teachers that are willing to help and that can come into your classroom via Skype. Classrooms from all around the world are waiting to be contacted for classroom collaboration. Students can learn about different cultures while sharing their ideas. The possibilities of using SKYPE in the classroom are endless.

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