

# Lead at the Elbow

Implementing technology with the 21st century learner in mind.

By Cindy Matthews

Ours is a rapidly changing society. The job of educators is to prepare youth for an unknown future. With that in mind, teachers have a specific and purposeful role in using social media with 21st century learners. In this article, we explore best practice considerations when implementing technology into modern-day classrooms.

## Why bother?

Youth spend inordinate amounts of time using social media. Viewed as time-wasting by some, other educators believe schools must instruct the ethical, creative, and responsible use of social media.

Jodi McMahan is an experienced literacy coach and teacher at P. W. Kaeser High School, Fort Smith, Northwest Territories. She and her students have a Facebook site (pwkreads) where students are presented reading challenges and discussion opportunities. In 2010, her English class developed a Wikipage called pwklitrocks. These ideas arose from a pilot project, Literacy with

Information Communication Technology (LICT).

She believes in getting 'into students' worlds and engaging them in a positive way...we have an opportunity not only to connect with...our learners, but also to promote learning that matches with the real world...that will propel them toward the next century'.

Students get immediate feedback on work posted and work is recognized. A written record of teacher and student comments exists.

Alberta teacher Shelley Cunningham is a lead teacher in the 21st Century Project and Alberta Initiative for School Improvement. Cunningham uses wikis for discussions and journal writing. Email is a communication tool for students and parents. One literacy question alone was viewed 2000 times and had received more than 150 responses in a class of 25 students. This type of exposure to a critical question cannot be duplicated. Students are more engaged and apt to participate using this mode of communication than traditional formats. Teachers mediate and direct the conversation while providing online support and input.

These tools allow for greater clarity of expression. A student writes, rereads, edits, rephrases and edits again. Reflection on ideas and writing process is considerable.

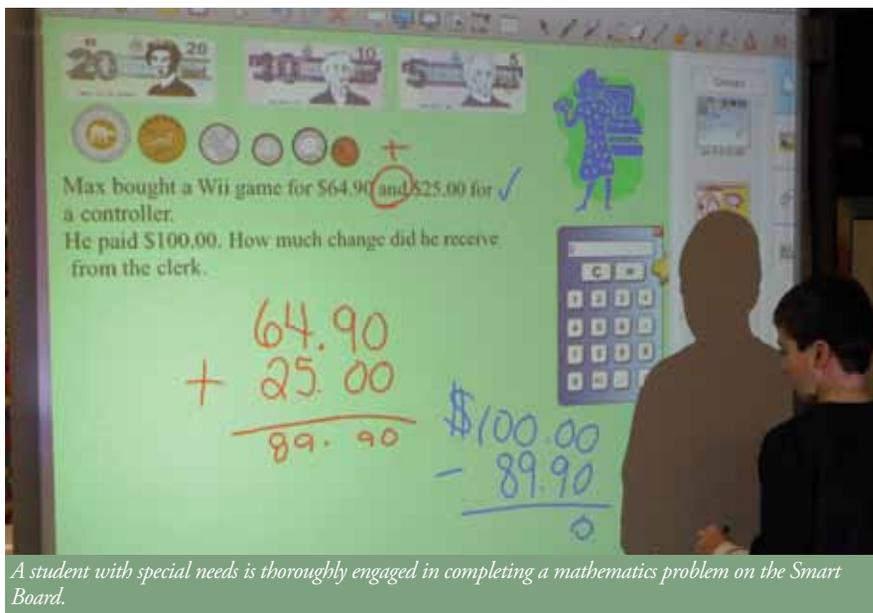
## So now what? What are the steps to implementation?

Greg Bass, superintendent of Education in Rocky View Schools, Alberta, says establishing a common district-wide vision is vital. Community engagement is significant to success. The district used a Facebook community page, Twitter and Word Press to invite input. Emphasizing the development of employment skills helped with parental buy-in. Further, the district built a powerful wireless system with abundant bandwidth to support access. Teachers were provided MacBooks, projectors, Interactive Whiteboard Technology, and professional development. These supports are important in helping staff move from 'knowledge disseminator to facilitator of knowledge construction'.

In the Northwest Territories, McMahan says the LICT pilot project is in three Northwest Territory schools and is poised to spread. Professional development has a technology integration focus and the territorial wikispace facilitates collaborative sharing by staff. Teachers using technology in the classroom lead by example.

Ryerson Public School in Cambridge, Ontario, is a unique example of a whole school technology venture. The original Ryerson was torn down and a new one built on the same site. Principal Peter Berndt designed and implemented a school with a technology vision. Every classroom has a document reader, access to iPads, built-in Smart Boards as well as sound-field speakers wired into the infrastructure.

This writer observed technology actively being used by Ryerson Public School special education teacher Kim Gill. Her students are reluctant readers and writers. Students use Twitter to message parents, a local university, classmates, and other teachers.



A student with special needs is thoroughly engaged in completing a mathematics problem on the Smart Board.



Technology must be up-to-date and accessible as evidenced by these two users.



This student uses traditional and contemporary forms of text at Ryerson Public School.

They participate in Teddy Bears around the World. ([www.langwitches.org/blog/travel/teddybearsaroundtheworld](http://www.langwitches.org/blog/travel/teddybearsaroundtheworld)) One student blogged about taking a class mascot on a cruise and then received feedback on his ideas.

Gill maintains a class website. Students write collaboratively through the Progressive Story Project (<http://writeyourstory.wikispaces.com>) with students from Canada and the U.S. One student likes using Global Read Aloud because you can talk to people anywhere in the world.

And therein resides the hook...**a global presence.** This alone validates to students the purpose of writing. When written words are 'valued' by others, students are more motivated to take risks and share ideas. Her students are engaged in learning in ways she never anticipated. Now her previous 'home-work avoiders' are responding to online questions at home!

Some parents who might not have come into the school offer ideas and ask questions through social media. Surveyed parents say they prefer staying in touch through Facebook.

Peter Berndt's vision of a technologically savvy staff and student body will be sustained if teaching staff remains engaged over the long run.

Berndt sums it up this way, "We can't afford to become dust balls."

### Wait a second? What about the naysayers?

Implementation of technology is not without issues. Many stakeholders are totally against the concept of technology in the classroom. These range from parents to community members to teachers themselves.

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The success of young people in the work place is contingent on aptitude with technology. Further, youth need to be critical users of technology and educators have a role in teaching the multimedia formats and platforms as well as netiquette. Educators must keep pace with those changes and embrace learning as 'modern literates'. Infrastructure, hardware and professional development dollars are required. Accountability is critical. And teachers must determine how to measure student growth and learning.

Bass says that teachers need to shift thinking and practices. In their district, future editions of textbooks will only be available in online formats. Staff must have an online presence with student learning as the focus.

Bass says, "This is not a fad—it is a revolution." His district has committed to facilitating teachers to work in a 'community of practice'. Fear of change is not helpful. District leaders must show persistence in the visionary plan. Sure, there will be growing pains and discomfort. With supportive 'master' teachers providing guidance, the negativism of naysayers can be contained.

McMahon and Gill agree that learning about technology and monitoring usage requires commitment, interest and time.

McMahon reminds us that deconstructing lessons to determine the skills being taught and/or reinforced is critical. Students are risk takers who uncover media tricks that teachers never imagined. And teachers have to be comfortable within that construct.

Greg Bass sums up the need for technological innovation this way: "It is about learner engagement, fostering innovation, creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and civic, social and environmental stewardship. All students need to be successful, in and along a path of their choice, for their flourishing."

Social media: Powerful educational potential we cannot afford to miss. ○

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