

“If We Share, We’re Halfway There”

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In our ongoing struggle to engage our kids in learning, I believe we are neglecting (or, even worse, deliberately preventing) one of our easiest and best opportunities. If our goal is to bring our schools and classrooms into the 21st century before that century ends, we need to take advantage of the large amount of innovation *that is already going on* in many of our classrooms by allowing our teachers to share it. And not just with others in their own schools and districts, but with teachers around the world!

As I travel in the U.S. and abroad speaking to teachers, administrators, and technology coordinators, it has become abundantly clear to me that a great deal of interesting innovation is going on in our system. If I ask any group of teachers the question “Who here is using technology in an interesting way?” I never fail to get a number of volunteers. They include teachers creating their own mini-games for their students, teachers using iPods and burning their own CDs for language instruction, teachers helping their students learn to program and to create their own games: teachers who’ve managed, in a variety of ways, to engage their students, usually by bringing in the students’ outside interests. And there are a great many more interesting examples.

When I hear what these innovators are doing, my reaction is “That’s great! – Who else knows about that?” “Well...” they typically reply, “it’s pretty much just in my classroom (or school, or district).”

In the age of the Internet and Google, that answer is not acceptable.

An eager new (or experienced) teacher might think, given the tools we now have, that with a simple Google query she or he could find out everything interesting being done in the world in area of, say 5th grade math. Or teaching U.S. history to 9th graders. Or teaching ethics. Or bringing the kid’s life outside of school into the classroom.

But they can't.

Sure, they can find certain sites devoted to many of these subjects, some created by teachers. But the day-to-day innovations and discoveries of individual teachers are not to be found. Why? *Because the stuff isn't up there for them to find!* In the age of the Internet, when all our schools are, finally, connected to the backbone, most of the innovation teachers do never makes it outside of their classroom!

This is a huge waste. And as technologists, it should be one of our primary jobs to correct this situation. And it shouldn't be that hard. Since much of the innovation already exists in documents (e.g. lesson plans), all that should be needed is a simple "save as html" and "copy to server."

But how many tech coordinators have provided all their teachers with an easy, transparent way to put an html page on the Internet? Or a blog? Or a wiki? (I got a very small show of hands when I asked this question at NECC.) How many even have permission to do this?

And if they have set this up, how many have made their teachers totally aware of how to post and persuaded them to do it regularly? How many teachers understand that they don't need to make something with fancy graphics – which they may not be able to do – but that it's rather about quickly sharing their good ideas and positive experiences? As an example, I am asked frequently about tools for making games. So recently I put up a simple, all-text html page, created in Microsoft Word, listing available tools I know of. (It is at http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/TOOLS_FOR_GAMES.html) Amazingly, people find it – I get thank you emails regularly from around the globe.

Making sharing easier should be technologists' second greatest priority after directly helping the kids. In fact, it *is* a big part of helping the kids. If every teacher doing something new and innovative could post their idea, approach or lesson plan as a simple html page, and then write about it in some blog, wiki, or listserv with a pointer, and so get going blogging's awesome power to share the best, we'd have an annotated database of all this innovation in no time. And if teachers then *used* this data we'd quickly have more innovative classrooms. And the best news is that we wouldn't have to build a thing – Google and Blogster have done all the work for us.

But we do have to give our teachers easy access and know-how, and we do have to be sure what they post is sharable outside their own bailiwicks and over the World Wide Web. Yes, it would also be great if people would create

open source tools for particular kinds of searching and compiling of this stuff, and if it got integrated with Moodle and other open source tools.

But even at the most simple level of every teacher's being able to set up and post an html page, blog or wiki viewable across the Internet, I'm sure we'd all be floored by what a simple search would find. There's a lot of innovative stuff out there.

So if you are a tech coordinator, and you haven't yet provided an easy way for your teachers to get stuff up on the Net, now's the time! And if you're an administrator don't stand in the way! And if you're a teacher, please share your innovations and successes.

The fastest route to engaging our students (and our teachers) is re-using, in our own way, those things that are *already* working. But we can't do that until we know about them! Technology can be our savior here.

Marc Prensky is an internationally acclaimed thought leader, speaker, writer, consultant, and game designer in the critical areas of education and learning. He is the author of Digital Game-Based Learning (McGraw Hill, 2001) and the founder and CEO of Games2train, a game-based learning company, whose clients include IBM, Bank of America, Nokia, and the Department of Defense. He is also the founder of The Digital Multiplier, an organization dedicated to eliminating the digital divide in learning worldwide, and creator of the sites www.SocialImpactGames.com, www.DoDGameCommunity.com, and www.GamesParentsTeachers.com. Marc holds an MBA from Harvard and a Masters in Teaching from Yale. More of his writings can be found at www.marcprensky.com/writing/default.asp. Marc can be contacted at marc@games2train.com.