The Online Environment
Knowledge eCommons

The idea behind this project was to teach students the computer and online communication skills that are increasingly becoming an essential part of social networking in online environments. We thought of this project when we realized that social networking sites are blocked at a lot of schools and yet, they are a reality in the lives of 21st century students. We need to teach them how to approach the online world, considering the vast amount of unpleasant issues students face.

We were initially thinking of a blog or a wiki, but then we found a more secure option – the Knowledge eCommons database, developed by a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at University of Toronto.

To access our database, click on
http://research.oise.utoronto.ca/~jhewitt/okc/client/Login.php?dbname=dbii65

Login information: welcome
Password: guest

Please note that you only have observational rights.

Although a class blog (created through wordpress, blogger, edublogs etc) could serve pretty much serve the same purpose, we found that this database gave us a chance to ensure the safety of the students and an exclusive, distraction-free environment.

If while going through our project you find that it would be conducive for your classroom as well, please do consider using it. The good news is that as of April 2010, Knowldege eCommons (commonly called

KeC) is available to teachers for free. To get your own unlimited access to this database, please send an email request to Professor Jim Hewitt of OISE, University of Toronto at jhewitt@oise.utoronto.ca.

To learn more about this database, the following link is helpful:
http://innovations.oise.utoronto.ca/edtech/index.php/Knowledge_eCommons_2.0

For more information with context to our experiences with the use of this database, you can contact the team leader of this project at nivedita.shori@peelsb.com.

Unit Plan for the 4/5 Social Studies/ Technology project

MEDIEVAL TIMES
ANCIENT EGYPT

This unit plan was developed for a split grade 4/5 classroom. However, it can be modified for and extended to any other junior [or even primary] topic.

I.   Introduce the units in the classroom and break it down into various units using graphic organizers. Assign student groups to study particular topics in depth.

Grade 4: Medieval Times –
1) Feudal System and Social Structure
2) Entertainment and Special Events
3) Religion
4) Castle Life
5) Knights, Armour, Battles
6) Food, Housing, Clothing

Grade 5: Ancient Egypt –
1) Government
2) Entertainment and Special Events
3) Family Life and Social Structure
4) Role of Environment
5) Art and Architecture
6) Religion and Culture

II.   Compile and introduce electronic resource list – Bookmark websites of relevance to the students' levels and topics of study. Compose an information letter to be sent to parents regarding the use of Internet for the unit being studied. Create individual student log-ins for access to the database.

III. Introduce students to the online database in the computer lab (in this particular case, Knowledge eCommons developed by OISE, University of Toronto; an alternative could be a blog):
http://research.oise.utoronto.ca/~jhewitt/okc/client/Login.php?dbname=dbii65

Teachers do several demonstrations. Post a Welcome video on the database itself. Students view video explaining database, followed by comprehension questions. Students leave their answers on the blog itself. Teacher models use of different technical features.

IV. Students learn about online etiquette in the library. Together, they create a power-point. Post the Power-point for ready reference in Resources section on database. Students engage in discussion about Internet Safety, online networking rules etc and post their responses.

V. In the classroom, students spend a few periods learning about the content through jigsaw activities, group work and independent work. They watch videos and are given independent research to do regarding their particular topic of interest.

VI. Teachers post some general 'discussion starter' questions related to the unit. In the computer lab, students start responding. Under teacher supervision, they make sure they're following expectations. Creative extensions: students use online programs like Voicethreads or recording programs like Audacity to record their answers and later embed into the database or blog.

VII. Teachers create three specific questions/tasks related to each topic of study and a culminating task (keeping in mind curriculum documents, critical thinking ideas, multiple intelligences and 'Transformational Practices', as practiced by Peel District School Board). The tasks are posted on the database. (In our case, we gave students access to only their topics of study at this point to avoid confusion.) Teachers also create, discuss and post Rules of Internet Responses based on the seven Norms of Collaboration (See appendix) for students to read before responding. To assess students' work, rubrics are made for Language Arts, Social Studies and Technology (see appendix). They are discussed with the students and posted on the database for ready reference by students.

VIII. Students post responses to the tasks based on their research, during a few computer-lab sessions. Teachers then respond to their postings giving them feedback and possible suggestions for improvement. Students then post a revised answer, based on the assessment they receive.

IX. The 'Netiquette' rules are posted in the lab and discussed from time to time in context with students' responses. Access is opened to all the sections and students start commenting on others' responses. 'Discussion' and 'Dialogue' are encouraged. Teacher moderation ensures a safe and comfortable environment, simulating blogging, emailing, commenting, agreeing, disagreeing etc.

X. Teachers mark student work based on the assessment rubrics.