

Using Technology in the Elementary Classroom

By Marilyn Western

Spiffing Up Social Studies with Technology OoLaLa

Do your students seem to have no clue about what is happening in the real world? Are they so wrapped up in what happened on the playground at lunch that they ignore what happens outside of your own school? You'll find that technology can come to the rescue with hands-on, interest-grabbing activities and resources that you really should have in your magic bag.

Current Events

Do your students know what is happening outside of their neighborhood? With our ability to receive news almost instantaneously, technology can help keep you and your students in touch with current events in Michigan, in the US, in the world. The following are sites that screen news for elementary students' eyes:

Scholastic News <http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/> *Free* for grades 1-8. Teacher section includes news stories, lesson plans, thinking questions, and not-very-subtle urging to subscribe to Scholastic News.

Weekly Reader <http://www.weeklyreader.com/homepage.asp> *Free* for grades PreK-6 +. Compliments your classroom subscription to Weekly Reader, but can be used without.

NewsCurrents <http://www.newscurrents.com/intro/index.html> *Subscription* for grades 3-12, but free trial. Features a teacher discussion guide on five or six current events articles for that week. Includes images, people, places, maps, and charts.

CRAYON (short for Create Your Own Newspaper) *Free* for upper elementary/middle school. Choose which news services or online news papers you wish to have access to and CRAYON will pull together the news for you. Not screened specifically for kids.

Interrelationships

If you have a current events bulletin board and/or a Friday afternoon discussion of what happened in the world this week, are your students able to draw parallels with what is happening in their own lives, neighborhoods, state, country or the world? Can they see the relationship between what happens in a border town in Israel and a border city in Michigan? To move your students into becoming lifelong learners and question askers, they need to be able to see the interrelationships between the world and themselves. Here are some activities to help with these higher level concepts.

Start simple. Connect an upper elementary class with a lower class. After a class discussion on emotions/feelings, the olders can take a series of digital pictures of a younger partner showing different emotions (a mad face, happy face, scared face, etc.). With supervision, youngers can take pictures of their older partners showing the same emotions. Next step, olders interview their partners to find out what makes them mad, happy, scared, etc. Armed with this info, the older students can create a minibook of feelings which include pictures of both partners with complete sentence captions of what makes them feel like their picture. Print and bind these books, then arrange a sharing time when olders can read the books to the youngers. Of course, each student will want a copy of their book. This could be easily done in KidPix, Word, or PowerPoint (print as handouts – 6 slides to a page).

Go a step farther with this activity and discuss several things students can do when they DO get mad, or scared, etc. Make a slide show called "When I Get Mad..." in Kid Pix or PowerPoint or just print out as a book to view/read when emotions start to get out of hand.

Whether your school uses the *Character Counts* program or something similar, students can design posters illustrating characteristics such as Fairness, Responsibility, Respect, and so on. Great for defining such traits. Posting them in the room can act as reminders.

For older students who need to see the relationships between countries, point them to **NationMaster** at <http://www.nationmaster.com>. This web site compiles data from a multitude of sources to graphically compare countries. For example, with 6 clicks, you can create a graph comparing female literacy rates between three countries of your choice. Very powerful tool and FREE!

To bring home the similarities and differences between people and places, have students set up an Excel spreadsheet with two columns labeled Alike and Different. As students research a city, state, or country, they can put their information on weather, geography, people, food, entertainment, etc. into either column. Once they collect all the data they can, have them summarize by deciding which area they would rather live in and give at least three reasons for their choice. Good for individuals or partners.

Geography

When students hear news stories about Russia, or Israel, or New York, do they know where the stories are happening? Can they locate the news breaking sites on a map? Here are a couple of activities that may spark their interest and prepare them for the Real world.

Create an interactive map in Tom Snyder's **MapMaker** software, or you can do-it-yourself in Excel. In Excel, you'll add a map as a background (or an image of the heart or a student's full-body digital picture, etc.), resize the cells to add more accuracy, and then insert comments which include information about specific sites on your map. If you have access to a microphone, you can also add an audio recording of you or a student giving information. Wow! A nice tutorial for this can be found at http://www.education-world.com/a_tech/techtorial/techtorial059.shtml. Create an interactive map for younger students, or have older kids create their own.

If you are not familiar with **Mystery Quest**, visit <http://www.remc11.k12.mi.us/dl/MysteryQuest>. Based on videoconferencing technology, classes can sign up to join the quest. Each class creates a presentation with clues about their mystery country and city. Other classrooms, using maps, the Internet, textbooks, and other resources, try to discover the mystery location. If you miss the registration deadline, you can hold your own Mystery Quest between classes in your school or district. Directions and suggestions are available at the web site.

History

When your students watch the news, do they know why it is happening? Do they (and you) understand the history of the event? Nothing brings relationships into sharper focus than a timeline. Tom Snyder's **TimeLiner** software will do it all for you, or you can use Word, Excel, or Inspiration.

In **Word**, everything you need to make a stellar timeline is available on the Drawing toolbar (View, Toolbars, Drawing). To spiff it up a bit, add clipart or digital images (of course, you'll cite your sources!!) You can also use **Excel** to create your timeline (the cells line up neatly) by typing in cells, merging, and formatting the cells. Complete directions for Word and Excel timelines can be found online at <http://www.edzone.net/~mwestern/tutorials.html>. Or download a free timeline template in Word, Excel, or PowerPoint from <http://office.microsoft.com> (click on Templates on the left and search for timeline).

Inspiration offers an easy alternative to making a timeline. Write the timeline topic as the main idea, create a diagram web of your dates & facts (or use the Outline view to write your dates/facts). Clicking on Arrange will give you options for how you want your timeline to look. And don't forget the power of adding images to your timeline!

However you decide to create a timeline, save it as a template for students to use: Locate your timeline file, but don't open it. Instead, *right* click on it to get more options. Select Properties, and then put a check in front of *Read Only*. If you put your template on a Shared drive, all students will be able to access it, and then save it to their own directory *with a new name*. If you need to make changes to your template, follow the same process, but *uncheck* Read Only. Once you make your changes, remember to make Read Only once again.

Don't think that timelines are reserved for 'All About Me' projects during the first week of school! Practice 'reading' timelines by taking the long view of history presented at **HyperHistory** http://www.hyperhistory.com/online_n2/History_n2/a.html. Choose People, History, or Events. Students can see what happened simultaneously in Greece, Egypt, and Rome. Great for beginning discussions on the causes for the rise and fall of civilizations. Lots of info here. Go beyond people and events, and have students research and create a timeline for technology that has always been in their lives: phones, microwaves, videos, the Internet, etc. or create a timeline of North American explorers. Timelines are a great way to organize your information and see relationships.

Marilyn Western is a former member of the MACUL Board of Directors, an MTIP Scholar, TAPS winner, and a Mt. Pleasant Public Schools 5th/6th grade computer lab teacher. Outside of the classroom, she has worked as the 1998-99 MDE Technology Using Educator on Loan, an Ameritech Technology Academy Instructor, and Technology Trainer for Gratiot Isabella RESD.