T·H·E journal

October 2006 — Article

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Showing Support for Teacher Websites

OPINION

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By Patricia Deubel

I get concerned when I visit a classroom teacher website that has bumblebees flying across the screen, leaves falling, scrolling ribbons of text waving about, and annoying music clips that play endlessly. I generally leave the site immediately. I also wonder about the lack of connection of pages to a specific school or district. Where's the support for teachers in running classroom websites? Is it worth the effort to develop a site?

It's necessary in this era of accountability for teachers to have a classroom site, and to post their pages among those of the school or district site. The name of the school or district and its logo should appear on all pages to provide evidence of an official connection and a unifying element among all teachers' sites at the school. Unfortunately, I don't always see this.

Sadly, when district sites, for whatever reason, do not include classroom teacher web pages, teachers often resort to other service providers—sometimes having to use their own funds to pay. I'm not endorsing a particular service, but I applaud sites such as Inspiring Teachers for offering free web pages for teachers. A membership includes 20MB of space, a free e-mail account, site-builder assistance, file management, and tools to promote the site. Teachers can also post their pages and get support services at Teacher Web, although there is a small annual fee.

Teachers must remember to create their pages with a purpose and audience in mind. They also need support for content, design, and maintenance. One easy solution is to employ the help of tech-savvy students, who can be of great assistance when it comes to site maintenance.

Building a User-Friendly Site

I'd like to suggest a few ideas to make classroom teacher websites more user-friendly:

- Avoid razzle-dazzle multimedia effects, as they really add nothing to learning and often detract from learners' information processing capabilities.
- A site's content must be accessible, easily navigated, easily read, and credibly written. For example, ensure text can be enlarged, audio/video play should be under the user's control, and the color palette used must be easy on the eyes and of sufficient contrast for those who are colorblind. Lighthouse International offers basic guidelines for effective color contrast that work for nearly

everyone (online here).

- Users should need only a few clicks to find information, and that information should be "chunked."
- Menus should be used that include links to plug-ins for viewing certain content, such as PDF and audio/video files.
- Make sure to alert users to any pop-ups being used on the site.
- Text should be presented on the middle 50-70 percent of the page in order to improve reading speed.
- Provide alternative electronic files to PDFs for students who use screen readers.
- Always avoid content that flashes, flickers, or blinks. According to provisions from the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board, such content between 2 Hz and 55 Hz might induce seizures in some individuals with photosensitive epilepsy.
- Pages should display the date on which they were last updated and include contact information. It's helpful to add a page URL at the bottom of pages for those who print out content to have a record of its source, but this feature is not as commonly found.
- For sites with many pages, a search function might be provided.
- I also encourage teachers to be wary of posting advertisements on their pages that are unsuitable for students, and not to link to any sites with inappropriate advertisements, even if those sites claim educational value. We must keep our students in mind at all times.

Bridging the Digital Divide

In its September release of "Computer and Internet Use by Students," the US Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics indicated that large demographic and socioeconomic differences exist in home computer use: "Whites and Asians are more likely to use computers at home than are blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians…Many disadvantaged students use the internet only at school."

Thus, a key issue related to creating a site has to do with whether or not students and parents would actually access the site from home. Those with the greatest need might not be logging on for a number of reasons: lack of a computer and/or internet access, limited understanding of the technology, or disbelief in its value. This means we need to increase our support for technology integration so every student can benefit from content on a classroom teacher website anytime and anywhere.

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Cite this Site

"Showing Support for Teacher Websites," T.H.E. Journal, 10/25/2006, http://www.thejournal.com/articles/19464

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