The course creator, not the course, empowers collaborative communities. Using the Internet to communicate without restraints due to place or time has allowed the quantity and quality of human relationships to increase. To prepare our students for the 21st century, we must understand who our Audience is, how we can Benefit from virtual communities and how to create these Collaborative communities. So, as in the past, our ongoing learning quest to bring better learning to our students will venture into space—“Cyberspace” where the ABC’s look the same, they are just spelled differently.

I expected it would improve their geography, writing skills and their awareness of the similarities of people all over our planet—and it did.

What never entered my mind was the change in my student’s behavior...they said things like “students in other schools will be reading or using this information so we need to get it right!” (Riel, 1993)

Educators are striving to make education more interactive, reflective, and independent by teaching everything from the Alphabet—to Biology—to Calculus—the time has come to expand our ABC’s. The role of educators has significantly evolved from “teachers providing destinations in a system that they feel is adequate,” to “reachers providing transportation to shape America’s future” (Chester, 2000).
Information technology has changed our language, our means of communication, our social interactions, our business transactions, our government, and even our education. Because information technology has become such a global and cultural influence, the ABC’s can be redefined as our Audience, understanding the Benefits of technology, and preparing for the Collaborative community that is “building” around the world. As educators of 21st century students we must answer three questions: Who is our Audience? What Benefit will technology provide? And, how can we create a Collaborative community?

Who Is Our Audience

We may best understand our audience by realizing who they are NOT. They are NOT students who have experienced dependable ethical leadership, entirely safe school environments or images of a world at peace. Our students are NOT afraid of technology, NOT naïve, and NOT easily motivated. Just by comparing the way that we communicate, it is obvious that we look at these issues very differently depending upon our age. Baby Boomers (1946-1964) communicated by way of their parents’ phone; Generation X (1964-1979) communicated by way of their own personal phone; and, Generation “Why” (1980-1994) communicates by way of pagers, cell phones, e-mail, chat rooms, and video cams. (Chester, 2000) Our audience looks expectantly and hopefully to us to allow and direct them to interact with their world.

What Benefit Will Technology Provide?

Technology is here to stay. We must remember that the teacher with 20 years experience needs training as much as the beginning teacher or student. We must use the tools of technology to obtain the maximum benefit for all educators and learners. Our students have traveled through cyberspace and are anxious to answer the “Whys” of their generation. The Internet provides self-empowerment to search for information. Our audiences need to be taught the skills to search and discern useful and authentic information. Students can communicate globally through the use of multimedia in much the same manner as the world’s largest institutions, corporations, and governments.
As leaders of 21st century students, we are sitting in the middle of one of the biggest opportunities ever afforded to professionals in education. “The appeal of online courses is evident:...increase the range of course offerings available to all students....educational access to special students (for example, homebound, incarcerated, and atypical students for whom regular classrooms are not effective). In addition, online courses provide an alternative method of instruction, one that adults are increasingly using for both professional and personal development.” (National Education Association, 2002)

According to Glenn Kleiman from the Center for Online Professional Education (COPE), there are several “Myths” about technology:

- Computers improve learning; more computers improve learning even more.
- There are agreed-upon goals and “best practices” that define how computers should be used in K-12 classrooms.
- Once teachers learn the basics of using a computer they are ready to put the technology to effective use.
- The typical district technology plan is sufficient for putting technology to effective use.
- Equity can be achieved by ensuring that schools in poor communities have the same student-to-computer ratios as schools in wealthier communities.

Modern technology in the classroom has great potential for improving teaching and learning. But, the prominent themes of the “Myths” listed above suggest that technology alone will not turn that potential into product. The benefit of technology use in the classroom will hinge on the way that we “define our educational visions, prepare and support teachers, design curriculum, address issues of equity, and respond to the rapidly changing world. (Kleiman, 2000)
How Can We Create a Collaborative Community?

One example, offered by Ed Eaton of IBM called *The MentorPlace* (2001) shows how IBM has donated hardware and money to local schools that were in need of technology within the classroom. Employees work with these schools to assist them in building online environments. So as you can see, IBM has been making plans to strengthen its ties to its physical community and to school’s virtual communities. Learning how to create online experiences can be acquired through programs such as *The Online Teaching and Learning Certificate* program offered through California State University Hayward. Instructors and their students benefit by actively pursuing knowledge in using technology.

“Current trends in educational practice support the idea that learning should be an active process whereby collaboration is an essential ingredient as it provides the opportunity to discuss, argue, negotiate, and reflect upon existing beliefs and knowledge.” (Boxel, Draaijer, Graaff, Los, 2001) There are many tools available for creating these virtual communities from simple web pages to sophisticated environments such as Blackboard, e-College, EduSystem and WebCT to name a few.

The course creator, not the course, empowers collaborative communities. Using the Internet to communicate without restraints due to place or time has allowed the quantity and quality of human relationships to increase. To prepare our students for the 21st century, we must understand who our Audience is, how we can Benefit from virtual communities and how to create these Collaborative communities. So, as in the past, our ongoing learning quest to bring better learning to our students will venture into space—”Cyberspace” where the ABC’s look the same, they are just spelled differently.

References


