

Lisha Wood

Dr. Crovitz

KMWP Technology Institute

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June 17, 2011

During Fall semester of last year, one of my AP Language students, Summer, was talking about the AP Language 4A Facebook group. I inquired about this group as I had never set up such a group. At my school, it's implicit that Facebook only causes problems; therefore, teachers are expected to use other appropriate means to communicate with students - a la - The Blog (not a completely unrelated concept with the 1970s horror film, *The Blob*).

Summer explained that this AP Language Facebook group was strictly dedicated to what was happening in her section of AP Language, 4th block on A-Days, and *only* the fortunate students of that class were inducted as elite members of this group - sorry, three other sections of Ms. Wood's AP Language, but you're on your own. Despite my perhaps overly comprehensive blog, Summer and the other 4A students felt more comfortable chatting on Facebook about assignments, synthesizing the plethora of information I had provided and minimizing it into bare bones. If they had questions, Summer would just email me, and I would reply to her while she simultaneously updated the rest of the class on Facebook. Now that's dedication and from a C student at best. This cumbersome communication left me feeling completely outdated and worse yet, at a loss to meet my students' needs. Ironically, one of our school's goals is "to increase communication among stakeholders." Hmm...I guess as long as I use two soup cans and a string, increased communication counts.

Schoolology to the Rescue

Because our school has such a collaborative nature, I wasn't surprised when the Video

Productions teacher approached me about using one of my classes as guinea pigs for his master's course on interactive teaching and social networking. He offered a few sites for me to use, but when he described Schoology briefly, I knew this was it. My 4A class was eager to try it, since they had made my blog obsolete. I set up their class on Schoology, had students create accounts and voila! Instant communication between my students and me. I was able to update assignments, message students, answer their questions, and post documents they needed. I set up a calendar, and like Facebook, only students who were accepted into the group could see our discussions and assignments. I am still a novice at Schoology, but there are several components to this website that make me feel my former ways of communicating with students are obsolete.

She's Got the Look

Schoology looks like Facebook. The interface is much the same, especially when compared with previous Facebook interfaces. My students really liked the look of Schoology, mainly because it resembles the one website they use the most. The language is also as similar as possible, considering the sites have different purposes. Students are able to create profiles with pictures and avatars, allowing them the individuality they crave, and post messages, giving them the social-networking aspect they love.

One Stop Shopping

Schoology streamlines most of the facets of communications I use with my students. Currently, teachers at my school are expected to post assignments, agendas, handouts, events, etc. on their blogs. Compared with regular blogs, every Schoology page looks the same, rather than having students navigate from one teacher's blog to another, where information is formatted differently, ultimately leading to frustration for both teachers and students. On

Schoology, the student's page has all courses he/she is taking in one place, with one format, which leads to streamlined communication. Students can log in and go directly to all the assignments, calendar, links, handouts, etc. for each class in one place, eliminating frustration. While updates will show up as soon as a student logs into the website, students can also request updates be sent to their phones. For larger files, Schoology utilizes Dropbox, where students can share files with teachers, allowing ease for teachers and students.

Social Networking as Education

Students live and breathe social networking, as most of us do these days. Schoology takes that desire and creates a place where students feel they are still being social, even though it is through an educational website. No, it isn't as fun as Facebook. But students have the feeling of connection to each other and their teacher. Social Capital is crucially underrated, yet vitally important in the educational setting – we *must* create a community of readers, writers, thinkers, and learners in order to make monumental gains in student engagement, and ultimately student achievement. By having discussion groups on this site, where sometimes just the students are asking questions about assignments, other times they are discussing concepts in novels, community is built. My new favorite tool in Schoology is the Topics selection. This tool allows a discussion assignment to be posted. I would use this by have students complete the discussion for homework, and then pull up the discussion on the LCD in class. We could discuss the responses, gleaning from these responses what we see as trends on this particular topic. Topics could be used to introduce a unit, check for understanding after an assignment, or review for tests, and so much more. The big difference is the teacher is now a part of these discussions, even when they are outside the classroom and can bring those discussion back into the classroom at any point.

And So Much More

I haven't even begun to use all of the features of Schoology, which at this point seem endless, especially for a free website. Schoology can track attendance and grades. Teachers can create online quizzes/tests for students, ranging from true/false to short answer, and Schoology will grade them. Schoology also allows teachers to keep these tests/quizzes, limit number of times taken, and time used.

Despite that I will still have to keep a blog this year, my main focus will be Schoology. The site includes everything I need and more, and I'm grateful to have been shown this site.

Check it out: www.schoology.com

To log in as a fake student and see what it looks like, use this log in:

username: jack.merridew54@gmail.com

password: merridew