

# STUDENTS ONLINE – WHAT WORKS?

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## ABSTRACT

This presentation explores the use by students of an Intranet navigation system which guides the use of collaborative projects between teachers, students and schools, websites, and online tools to enhance teaching and learning in the primary classroom. By embedding the use of ICT across a range of curriculum areas purposefully, the use of the Internet is vitally significant. Ideas will be shared that encourage successful teacher pre-searching and connecting, to support student re-searching, exploration and connectedness to both local and global community. Streamlining student access to the Internet and other people, using picture based Intranet web pages will be discussed. With the Internet becoming more pervasive in homes and classrooms - how we choose to scaffold our students' use of online time is an essential consideration. Connecting our media rich, visually enhanced future generation to meaningful learning and learning communities, as critical thinkers, will help them to know what works for them in their world.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ploughing and plodding through a plethora of plain products and pallid places (and possible predators or perverts) OR productively parading and playing through powerful possibilities with passionate people (with Police checks) – Teachers and their tools are the difference.

“Where do you want to go today” the Microsoft Corporation asked us in 1994 as part of their international promotional campaign. (Microsoft Corporation Library, 2003) Ask a young child where they want to go and the answers vary enormously – the beach, the park. If we clarify the question by including ‘if you are on the Internet’ OR ‘if you had free time online’ then the answers, although somewhat clarified, are just as diverse. There are some patterns of response according to age, experience, peer or family influences or gender but the diversity of choices of ‘where to go’ still remain. Another more leading question at the outset might ask “How will you get there” or “How will you know when you get there?”

The answers for teachers and educators become clear when these leading questions are considered – they need help, guidance, support and above all EDUCATION about where to go, how to get there, and how to know you are there and where there is, when working online. Teachers are knowledge rich but time poor, students are often time rich but knowledge poor. How can this balance be levelled so that the time we spend online together, and apart, is purposeful, productive, powerful, passionate and full of possibilities?

## 2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1. Aspendale Gardens Primary School is a rapidly growing school of currently 450 students. It opened in 2002 with less than 300 students and will grow to more than 550 in 2005. For a young school it is well resourced with a student to computer ratio of 3:1 across the school. Many of these computers are clients on a Thin Client Server such that basic applications plus Internet access are available on the majority of machines. Students have ready, anywhere, anytime access to technology resources as required. The school has been working on

developing an Icon based Intranet navigation system with input from staff, parents and community. This initiative has been driven by the e-learning team and the Website is managed and maintained by Judy Beal on behalf of the school.

### 3. IDEAS AND STRATEGIES – Where in the world should we go and who with?

3.1. **For the teacher** – Teachers are busy people and good teachers are even busier people. There are many good teachers out there who are not sharing the learning they are doing with one another and this is a disservice to all of us and our profession. We do not always have the time, or for that matter the skill, to ‘create’ interesting curriculum for our classrooms which meets not only the outcomes and requirements of our boards and regions but more importantly the learning needs of our students both now and in the future. While others are inventing really good wheels we are sitting doing the same so let’s share our creations and/or create together. At the outset, learning successful search strategies for ourselves is an excellent starting point. This includes searching for people as well as information. Do we know the Boolean rules? Can we use the advanced sections of our favourite search engines? Do we recognize that different learning styles might lead us to search differently from someone else and that this is not only ok but preferable? Are we aware of the many different types of search engines available, including visual search engines? Can we use directories successfully to find a range of resources for our students and ourselves? Do we know how to check the literacy level of a Web Page in order to match it to the learning needs of our students? Do we know how to ask good questions? Are we able to find out the qualifications of those we are asking? Are we willing to do an analysis/evaluation of the pages we find, to check that they meet with the standards we might apply to other resources in our classrooms – e.g.; printed materials? All of these are skills we should seek to apply or acquire if we want to use Internet resources in our classrooms – they are also skills we can learn online ourselves or teach one another. Many teachers are not willing to admit what they do not know to their own colleagues, face to face, and perhaps it might be easier to admit our needs to ‘strangers’ on the other side of the world where we might get exactly the answers we are seeking. Lesson 1 – seek support if you do not know.

3.1.1. **Teacher pre-searching** – The importance for teachers of ‘going there first’ cannot be understated. (How many hits will you get if you simply google the word dog? 85,200,000 on December 31<sup>st</sup> 2004) Teachers need to lead by example in modelling best practice search strategies and encouraging students to question each page with a critical eye. Not all 85 million plus of course! This new techno-literacy requires structured and explicit teaching and discussion of how to search successfully. In a review of *Managing literacy, technology and learning in schools* authored by Lankshear et al, Glen Seidel writes

*“Technoliteracy education at it’s simplest level involves students using new communication and information technologies to develop the same old skills of researching, analyzing, decoding, and encoding information effectively.” (Seidel, G 2000)*

Ensuring that the page you want to use loads on your machines at school, that it looks the same at school as it does at home, that there are not annoying pop-ups, that the sources are valid, that the purpose and intention of the author are clear and that the page is both useful and relevant may seem like overkill but it is merely the beginning of a very important ‘sifting and sorting’ process. By visiting pages in advance we also ensure the likelihood of faster load time if working through a proxy server – this can save significant time online for students and teachers.

3.1.2. **Verification of sources – Validity** – We are continuing a constant battle against plagiarism, copyright and the protection of intellectual property. In an educational climate such as this it is imperative that we maintain our vigilance, and that of our students, in adhering to appropriate and verifiable sources of information, and appropriate referencing from a very early age. Teaching students strategies about finding out who the author is; are they contactable, qualified, reputable, is vitally important. Encouraging students to keep logs of their Internet based searches as they go so that they know ‘who linked to who’ and ‘how they got to where they are’ can be useful tools for revisiting sources or validating references. Simple tables can be used for such purposes. – see table 1

Website	Date Accessed	What	Comment
url – paste this in	Can use ‘Insert – Date and time”	List what you found here or info you might use	any other information eg: useful pictures, links
<a href="http://abc.net.au/children/space/">http://abc.net.au/children/space/</a>	31 December 2004	Linked to Whoosh site about planets	Some great information

Table 1

3.1.3. **Purpose and Authorship – Kathy’s 5 W’s** – Kathy Schrock (2001) <http://kathyschrock.net> has developed an enormous range of catalogued resources at her Discovery School and personal websites, including a range of website evaluation tools, but one very simple reference tool she has developed is the 5 W’s used in evaluating websites <http://kathyschrock.net/abceval/5ws.pdf> – these are particularly useful when working with students who need a quick analysis of a site they are visiting. Her five W’s are Who, What, When, Where and Why. These questions are simply listed with leading questions that explore authorship, purpose, currency, source and suitability or bias.

### 3.2. Connecting -

*“Just as students need to learn by building their operational skills onto a cultural and critical base, so too must teachers be able to commandeer their learning for their own purposes. This is not as simple as paying for some PD days. If staff are to become believable exponents of technoliteracy they must meaningfully incorporate it into their own lives first.” (Seidel, G 2000)*

Finding learning mentors for ourselves as teachers can be a real challenge. We are wonderfully adept at grouping students but many of us need support to find like minded practitioners. The Internet has opened a wealth of opportunity for us to be connected to one another and to find meaningful supporters for each new stage of our own learning journey. There are many forums and chat sites for teachers where we might learn by lurking or by becoming actively involved in multi-continental projects. Some of the online areas that our staff find useful are linked to the school’s intranet for use by staff. Some of these, mostly Australian ones are;

- The Idea Bank [www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/ideabank/](http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/ideabank/)  
Teacher generated ideas through sofweb – newer ideas are at the knowledge bank <http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/knowledgebank/default.asp>
- Education Network Australia <http://www.edna.edu.au/> has fantastic theme pages and verified links sorted under educational headings
- Free web space for teachers – varies enormously [www.teachers.ash.org.au](http://www.teachers.ash.org.au)
- Online projects for teachers and their students <http://ozprojects.edna.edu.au/>
- Includes Kathy Schrock's Guide for educators <http://school.discovery.com/>

We also work collaboratively online when searching using a ‘backflip’ ([www.backflip.com](http://www.backflip.com)) account for the whole school. Through this ‘assortment’ of collected sites we are able to build a multiple user perspective of what sites might be useful for our growing Intranet for students. Collected sites are sorted by teachers as they work under a range of headings and sub-headings in line with curriculum and themes.

When teachers are struggling or grappling with an issue or a problem the old adage is now truer than ever that “a problem shared is a problem halved”. It is perhaps possible that a problem shared with an online community is a problem multiplied by as many solutions as there are members of the community!

**3.3. Intranets and Icons – Tools to make it happen.** What happens to all this successful sharing, searching and pre-searching is the next and extremely important step in the learning and teaching process. Access for the students to the resources the teachers would like them to have available is created through an Icon based Intranet. The site they access at school is accessible from any online computer in the world and many students find this outside access to matching resources very helpful. The students can access not only the lists or images linked to a variety of sites, but are often also able to download curriculum overviews, worksheets, forms, rubrics or checklists applicable to different units of study. Many teachers find this aspect particularly powerful as they no longer need to battle with the ‘I can’t find my project sheet’ issues anymore and can direct students to organise another for themselves from online. Students are able to navigate their way, using pictures, to a range of resources, activities or websites both online and on the server by hyper linking from familiar images. This navigation system is easy to understand and logically structured to cater for a range of learning styles with text based toolbars complementing picture based structures. The opening page of the school Intranet is shown below – see diagram 1;

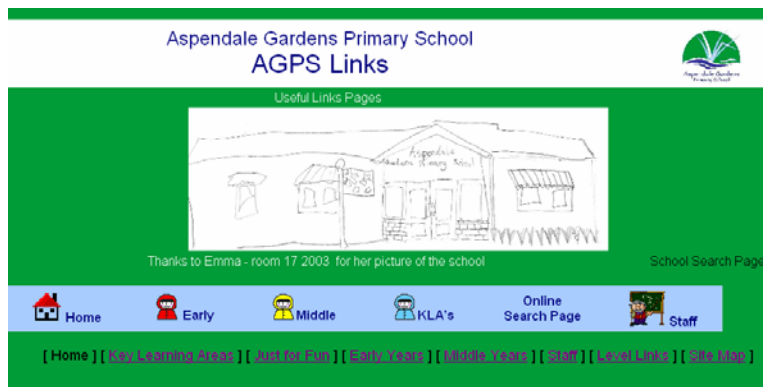


Diagram 1

#### 4. The Ideas in practice

Examples of some of the sites the students have been linking to successfully include;

- Fraction converters and calculation tools
- Language translators
- Interactive games and activities
- Early and Middle years pages with age appropriate icons – see **Diagram 2 in 4.1**
- Links to search engines for students
- School work or topic related sites such as the ‘Dead Duck’ project site
- Themed sites such as the Olympics, Space, Wetlands, Gold, The Sea
- Level sites according to themes such as Electricity, The Human Body, Toys
- Key Learning Area sites around each Curriculum area – see **Diagram 3 in 4.1**
- Staff pages – often used by students for links to reference materials

Students also use a range of tools to connect with other students and this is an area in which the school is looking to expand through the next 3 years.

##### 4.1. Intranet pages for different levels and areas of schooling - examples



Diagram 2



Diagram 3

5. **Where to from here?** – Creating simple tools for student navigation online has been a big task but has long reaching benefits in the structures established for growth of such tools within this school community and beyond. As this young (3 year old) school becomes more actively involved in showcasing the use of Information and Communication Technology in schools through the Creating e-learning Leaders project with the Department of Education and Training in Victoria, these tools may prove invaluable as an example; of a simple idea which makes a very complex online world a powerful package of possibilities just one click away. Where do you want to go today? Ask a teacher then help that teacher find the way.

#### 6. REFERENCES

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