

Mentoring Project:
Creating a Classroom Website

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Background

Butte Elementary is a special place. It is a small school in a community just outside Palmer, Alaska, where I grew up. I attended the school as a student, my father was principal there when I was in high school, and I am fortunate to have been a teacher at Butte since 1996. The teachers, students, and the community are like family. This is the community I work in and share my days with.

Since I began my Masters in Math Education with UAS, my focus has been on mathematics. My strengths have always been in teaching literature, writing, and the arts, so venturing out into the world of mathematics education was an interesting experience for me. I have always been a fast learner with technology, and working on a graduate degree in this age of learning has been a stretch for me. So much of the role of technology in my education has been a learning experience for me, and when I learn something new, I usually share it with my teaching partner or my colleagues. They trust that I will be patient, for I have been the new learner so much as well.

My teaching partner and I have worked together for the last 15 years. Because we are a small school, we only have two teachers at each grade level. When I mentioned about an upcoming technology mentoring project this last fall for my Ed Tech class, he got excited. "Teach me how to set up a classroom website like yours!" I had to laugh. This was a huge step for him because he had decided last year that he was only going to do a minimum class webpage. He and I shared irritation (with many other classroom teachers) that our district required teachers to maintain a webpage with a list of things that had to be on it. Of course, it was a demand issued to teachers on one of those days before school starts when the only thing you have on your mind is getting ready for the new group of students you will have in a couple of days.

Last year we had to use the school district's webpage creator program which is rigid, boring, and difficult to use. Not only were teachers frustrated that one more mandate had been thrown in their laps, but the tool they were being required to use was poorly suited. It was ill-timed and was met with minimal cooperation. It inspired me to create my own classroom website this last spring on *Weebly* to suit my needs. I had used *Weebly* to create my Master's Portfolio and found its tools easy to use, offered various layouts, and was free. When my teaching partner checked it out, he wanted to create something like that for his classroom.

Literature Review

There are many benefits for a teacher to have a classroom website that is customizable to the needs of the teacher, parents, and students. A classroom website can provide increased communication for parents, families, and students, act as a resource and a safe place to explore for students, promote student successes, and it can enhance your curriculum. It can be a place where distant relatives can see what is going on in their grandchild's classroom, or it can be a source of information for parents and students.

Jim Moulton, writer for Edutopia, an online magazine, says of classroom websites: "Every American educator needs to build and maintain his or her own teacher Web page. Before you respond with arguments about how many non-Web-paged educators are among the best teachers you know, understand that I'm sure you're right. In fact, I bet many of those nonwired teachers run wonderfully holistic, project-based classrooms where hands-on activities abound and high expectations for all students are the rule rather than the exception. But I believe they could be doing so much more for their students if they did have a Web page." (Moulton, 2008)

Many website creation sites are available online, but I chose *Weebly* due to my familiarity with using it. Genia Connell wrote in her “Top-Teaching” blog at Scholastic online article, “Create an Impressive Class Website in Less Than an Hour,” about how easy it is to create a simple website to suit your needs in a short amount of time. She gives tips for beginning one and suggests using *Weebly*. “Perhaps my favorite feature of *Weebly* is that there are endless options for personalizing and customizing your website to fit your needs, with no limits on pages or sizes of files you can upload.” (Connell, 2013) Connell even suggests spending time during summer break to expand and personalize your classroom website because teachers have time to play around with personalizing it.

An article in *Teachnology*, “Designing a Website for Your Class”, discusses the benefits for teachers in creating a quality classroom website. “If you take your time to develop a premier web site, it can directly and indirectly affect the quality of your teaching. A well thought-out web site can teach your students by providing links to other pages that reinforce what they are learning in class. A website can also be a valuable source of information by letting students know what they missed. The greatest quality of a web site is the increased communication between the teacher, students, and parents.” (*Teachnology*, Date Unknown) Thinking through and planning for the purpose of the website and its role in your classroom is important in having a successful website.

Methodology

Embarking on this project, I drew up a weekly plan with the end in mind. Over the years I have found that beginning anything I prefer a plan in place with the understanding that plans change according to whatever the needs are or mishaps that occur along the way. Whatever happens, at least at the beginning I know which direction I want to go. In this case of mentoring

my teaching partner in creating his own classroom website, I knew that it was going to depend on his needs and that we may have to change direction or adjust the time planned on tasks.

Either way, the goal being that he will have a classroom website he can use and be comfortable at independently managing and modifying pages on the site.

We began with the goal of meeting weekly during our prep period and/or after school on certain days of the week. Both of us have busy schedules, so finding common time to work together was a challenge in itself. Based on the ideas he had in mind of creating a class website, I put together a weekly timeline of goals for our sessions:

- Week 1: Open a *Weebly* account & choose theme for template
- Week 2: Get familiar with *Weebly*'s website editing tools, adding titles, text boxes & inserting columns
- Week 3: How to add & organize pages, discuss what parts he wants on his site
- Week 4: Inserting images & videos, adding links to buttons, texts & images
- Week 5: Setting up Scholastic Book Clubs online ordering for parents & link to its website
- Week 6: Uploading documents, converting Publisher-created newsletter docs to pdf format, posting spelling lists & newsletters
- Week 7: Adding student links
- Week 8: Adding parent resources like field trip info & links
- Week 9: Fine-tuning maintenance, trouble-shooting strategies

Data was going to be collected weekly through a record of meeting dates, journal entries, and occasional reflections by my teaching partner, as well as the classroom website itself.

The mentoring began in September. We started with opening up a free account with *Weebly* online and my teaching partner chose a theme he liked. The second week we worked on creating a home page for his website. I showed him how to add titles, text boxes, and how to change the number of columns for the text on the page using *Weebly*'s editing tools. He played around with this, but lost some of his work. The only thing we could figure out was that the *Weebly* site was having difficulties on their end. This set us back, for the next session, during the

third week of the mentoring project, my teaching partner was confused because his website didn't look the way he was sure he had left it. We started over, not quite at the beginning, but close. The weekly goals plan was beginning to change.

At the start of the fourth week of mentoring sessions we worked on how to add and organize the website's pages. The next week we played around with adding images and how to insert videos. I also showed him how to add buttons and assign links to the buttons. This is also the same method we use to attach links to text and images. On the sixth session we worked with converting his weekly classroom newsletter to a pdf so that it could easily be uploaded to his site. We also played around with posting the newsletter on the home page itself, rather than a link to the home page. My teaching partner chose to put the newsletter document right onto the home page and was able to learn how to adjust the size of the document.

The seventh week he wanted to see how to add links to websites for students to use. I showed him how I have a page for student links they can use for research, practice, and content studies. He wanted to add a link for his students to extend their study of owls. I reminded him that the link to the owl research site could be attached to text, a button, or an image. The last two weeks, weeks 8 and 9, were spent adjusting his site layout, creating and organizing his pages (he didn't want too many and kept changing the pages), and updating the classroom newsletter and spelling lists. He decided he would have to come up with a routine for the website updating.

The last session ended with a discussion about what we had accomplished, what we were going to do next, and reviewed what our original goals were. I told him I would be available for support and guidance when he needed it for managing and adding to his classroom website, especially since there were several items we were going to add to his site that we didn't get finished. More than likely we will both be teaching together until we retire, so there is not an

urgency to finish, but rather this technology mentoring is a motivation to continue growing with technology's learning curve.

Results

My journal entries mirror the sessions. I found that I explicitly listed what we did at each session, and followed with jotting my feelings about how it went. There are nine journal entries. Instead of putting my teaching partner's whole name in the data report below, he is mentioned as "D" in the entries.

- Week 1: We opened up an account with *Weebly*. D picked out a theme for his classroom website. This is a good start. He seems excited about having it started and noticed that the theme he picked out is very simplistic and clean.
- Week 2: Introduced D to the tools for adding titles and text. I showed him how to change the number of columns in the text and we added a home page. D still seems like he is positive about working on the website. He said he was going to work on it some and play with the tools.
- Week 3: Had to restart on home page. D had worked on it in the last week, but some of it was lost. There were two home pages and neither had everything he put on it. Started over, adding home page, titles, and short bio about himself (teacher bio) on the home page. D doesn't seem like he's clear on the difference between home page and other pages. Will need to go over that next time. Either *Weebly* was having difficulties with their main site, he forgot to save his work, or he went to add a new page and forgot to call it something other than home page. Not sure, but think we're back on track.
- Week 4: Went over adding other pages other than the home page. Made sure I covered how the home page is the first page parents and students go to. D said he would try a student links page and add a spelling list page. I reassured him that he can always change them, link them, or delete them. Just want him to get familiar with adding pages in *Weebly*, naming them, and showed D how to hide the pages as well. Did notice that he gets confused a bit on the adding pages tool, with the list. He forgets to check which page name pops up at the top. Seems like D is satisfied that his site is getting organized though.
- Week 5: Today we practiced adding images and videos. D did not seem interested in adding videos, but I wanted to show him how easy it is and that he may want to use it in the future if there is a video related to the content they are studying in his classroom. He appeared surprised at how simple it is to add to the web page. D added a couple of pictures on his home page from the internet.

- Week 6: Showed D how to save his weekly classroom newsletter as a pdf so that it can be uploaded to his website easier. Practiced using *Weebly*'s document and video tools. I showed D what they can look like on student links page by showing him mine that I added to recently for our salmon studies. He seemed a bit overwhelmed at how much time could be spent on building an extensive site. Said he wants to keep it simple. Told him that's the best way to start.
- Week 7: After showing D my student links page, he wanted to set up some student links for their study of owls. Showed him how to attach an outside web link to a button, an image, or text. D used buttons and images and practiced adding URL links to them. Told him it looks better if you are consistent with where you put your links to websites and he said he would use buttons. D got a few owl links on his student links page.
- Week 8: Worked with D to revamp his website and organize his pages. Reminded him to think of the purpose of each page. D decided to put spelling lists on their own page and the newsletter on the home page. He had tried putting all of them on the home page and eliminating the spelling lists page, but it looked too busy. Recreated the spelling lists page and adjusted size of the newsletter document. D mentioned that he was going to need a routine to keep these things up to date on his website. Suggested he do it on the day he writes his newsletter. Said that would be on Mondays. I told him that I still struggle with finding a routine. With all of my insane work and school demands I do not have my newsletter and spelling lists completed on a regular day. I was pleased that he was thinking of this because he is processing how to make it work for him. Yay!
- Week 9: Finished up and discussed what got accomplished and how he needs to continue to play around with building onto his classroom website. The bare-minimum basics are there and he seems to be able to use the common tools in the *Weebly* editing mode. Showed D how to easily switch in and out of the editing mode to check how the site looks by viewers. Said he still wants to add the Scholastic Book Clubs ordering link, but not as ready as he thought he would be for it. Asked if I could still show him how to add that. I told him that although this mentoring project is done, I can still work with him to develop his website. He seemed relieved.

My teaching partner wrote comments three times throughout the mentoring project. They were summaries of what he had done on his website and ideas for what he might want to do on it in the future. He also wrote a reflection after the ninth week was finished in which he described how he felt about what he learned and what he still wants to do with technology in the classroom with his students. He wrote, "Ms. Christensen has been an invaluable piece of my getting a classroom website up using the *Weebly* program. She has provided specific and useful

instruction and constructive feedback as needed. Ms. Christensen has aided me in setting up a site that is uniquely tailored to my needs and wishes. She helped me set up a home page, develop links for unit studies such as science and social studies, and provided instruction on uploading weekly newsletters to the site. In the future, I would like to continue to expand the site to include specific web sites for various curricular areas including mathematics and language arts. In addition, I will be looking to her as a resource for expanding the use of laptop computers into my mathematics and languages arts workshops, as well as into the content areas of social studies, science, and health.”

Discussion

In analyzing and interpreting the results of my mentoring project, I think back to when we began this mentorship. Overall, I am satisfied with the results. My teaching partner has a classroom website that is simple to use and update, he is independent in creating pages and uploading documents to the website, and he has the beginnings of a student-and-parent-friendly website. Although we were not able to achieve all of the initial goals, I feel positive about his motivation and excitement about what he is using and made. Knowing his personality, he will add to the classroom website on his own and personalize it to fit his needs and the needs of his students and parents.

This technology mentorship will continue. During our last session, when we were discussing how we thought the project went, my teaching partner looked at me with a wide-eyed, panicked expression and said, “Wait, does that mean you are done helping me with technology?” That cracked me up. It wasn’t until that moment that I realized how successful we had been. Apparently he was on a roll, and was not ready to stop. He then told me that he had plans to add

onto his website and to use the portable laptops lab-cart we have available in our school with his students. In his final reflection piece he reinforced this plan and how he wanted to use it.

“It is not about the technology; it’s about sharing knowledge and information, communicating efficiently, building learning communities and creating a culture of professionalism in schools. These are the key responsibilities of all educational leaders.” This quote by Marion Ginapolis speaks to my mentoring project in that it wasn’t really about the technology. For us the project was about trying something new and having the support to build confidence in this learning. I learned during the mentoring that although we had goals for each session we worked together, they were fluid and shifting depending on my mentee and his needs.

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