

EDL 792.83 Project 1
Reducing Teach Isolation
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July 9, 2006

Proposed Activity

The arrival of Dr. James Barney to the Milton-Union school district ushered in a new dedication to professional development. Dr. Barney based the school's vision on Jim Collins' "Good to Great" a book about systematic changes in organizations. With the revitalization of professional development in our school, Dr. Barney increased the number of waiver days and hired principals based on his ideals. The high school now has a principal with a PhD and a grand vision of how to increase the effectiveness of teacher instruction. Two years ago, one of our waiver days was mostly staff driven; I taught a session on the use of smart boards for instruction. The proposed activity is based on this framework.

It is a noted irony that teaching is both a very social yet frustratingly isolated profession (Cookson, 14). Teachers can encounter hundreds of students every day, yet may not see another adult (I personally can attest to not seeing several specific teachers for weeks). Studies have documented that even when teachers see each other it may lack professional intercourse. Pennington documents many such studies concerning physical educators (45). In small schools, where there may be only one science teacher or one art teacher, how do the teachers go about discussing the specific issues of their concentration and relieving their isolation? Research suggests that building relationships is a major component (Burnmeister, 30) Heider delves into issues concerning mentoring strategies to reduce isolation and increase retention rates. Indeed nearly 500,000 teachers changed schools or left the profession entirely in 2000, many claiming isolation as a cause (Heider). Luckily, current technological trends could provide the answer.

The use of updated internet web logs, traditionally called a 'blog', has been popular for many years. Using Google laboratories "Trends" feature, however, we find an explosion in the search for the term "education blog" (see figure 1). "School blog" yields a logarithmic graph dating to mid-2004.

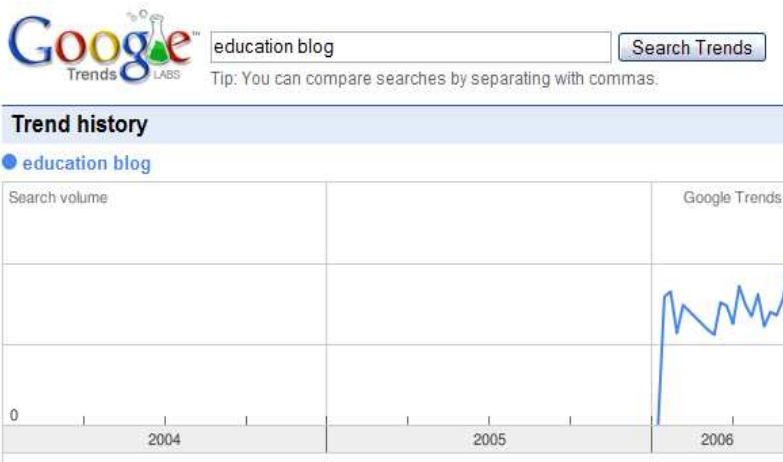


Figure 1: Google Trend History

A study by Pennington looks at the use of internet listserves to keep physical educators professionally connected. A listserve is similar to a blog, except that it works through email alone

and anyone can post comments. A blog, on the other hand, can only be updated by a selected few, however anyone can usually make comments about a particular posting.

Pennington's research shows that the listserves are used for a vast array of professional functions, connecting hundreds of physical education teachers across the country (perhaps the world). Pennington did not mention blogs for performing a similar function, but that is precisely the action I intend to undertake: Teaching teachers how to find and use blogs to enhance their knowledge of the field, their instruction, and their professional network.

Milton-Union schools are small enough to warrant only one teacher for many subjects. There is one PE teacher in elementary and middle schools, and at the high school one teacher in each of the following: chemistry, physics, French, industrial technology,

biology, home economics, special ed math and science, government, art, and geography. Even though the core departments average three to five teachers, there are seldom multiple teachers teaching identical classes. The strain on those teachers to keep pace can lead to burnout, another result of isolation (Darn).

Working with the principal, I would like to initiate another day devoted to a faculty driven in-service. I would volunteer to show teachers where to find and read blogs (Google blog search). Also, with a little planning I could introduce listserves and newsgroups (newsgroups are similar to email but go through a separate program and are more like bulletin board postings). These sessions could run 30 to 50 minutes easily with time on computers. I think teachers will be surprised by the power to keep up-to-date in their specific fields. Many blogs target leadership concerns from all over the nation and not just class specific.

Concerning evaluation of the project, our superintendent has used forms from central office. The principal has suggested having teachers submit evidence of their learning outside of class. It would be possible to submit blog articles the following month. Since there would be 4-6 sessions during the in-service day, these would have to be small and easy to complete tasks as each session would have a requirement to meet the next month.

My Leadership Capacity

The small informal session that the teaching blogs encompasses many of my natural skills. As an ISTJ personality, the small time frame gives enough time to dish out the

facts and let the audience guide the rest of their development (computer time). I have previously given a small session on using Smartboards, and was considered a success. Many of the natural teacher-leaders in the building would like to know how to easily keep abreast of current topics and research (many blogs provide links to other blogs).

Associated Leadership Roles

The simplicity of the program is a key to its implementation. I would be solely responsible for planning and implementing the instruction. The participants would be k-12 teachers from the district that specifically had an interest in learning how to up their leadership roles and professional acumen using the internet. The only thing I would require is a computer lab so that teachers have an opportunity to find their own interests in the greater blogosphere (the all-encompassing world of blogs). Not only is the information valuable on its own merit, but as our district and building has increased the emphasis on development, it will provide another resource for teachers hone their craft.

Specific Development Activities

The one-hour instructional period will take approximately two weeks to research and accumulate proper links for all disciplines. Time will be spent learning about listserves and newsgroups which are entities I have not dealt with since college. The key to ensuring success is that teachers will volunteer to take the session getting those interested the most. I would lead off with an introduction to the Education Wonks host of the weekly Carnival of Education, a cornucopia of education postings from around the country. For Ohio we would discuss Scott Elliot's "Get on the Bus" blog for the Dayton Daily News and

the Fordham Foundations Ohio edition of the Education Gadfly that targets education issues specific to Ohio. Then I would introduce subject specific blogs to help with instruction. Listserves and news groups would get a brief mention and I would wrap up by having teacher browse several blogs themselves in a lab setting.

Summary

Technology changes the shape of how things are done but the affected entity must keep up with the changes to have benefit. The assembly line models of the early 1900's would not work in today's factories, as the American motor corporations learned in the 1980's from the Japanese influences. Likewise, today's teachers face new models yet tend to hold stalwarts of support. Technology has changed the face of our communications and teachers do need to realize they do not have to leave their living rooms to converse. For my teacher leader portfolio journals, not a single entry was in person, but was rather discussed via instant messaging technology, which allowed me to save the conversations and recall them accurately.

Blogs serve a similar function for teachers whether it be venting frustration, asking questions, discussing current trends of instruction or merely as comic relieve from a days hard work. Throughout the Educational Leadership program, blogs have provided me with excellent sources of fodder for discussion and research. The feeling of isolation can be combated in the comfort of a teacher's home using these resources. A sampling of blogs is found on my portfolio webpage, <http://my.core.com/~mskiles/portfolio>.

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