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Collaboration Goes Global

Imagine yourself working in a room where you get to decorate just about any way you wish. Now further imagine yourself getting to spend at least five out of seven hours a day as the sole director of what occurs therein.

Few professional settings operate this way—and yes, we all recognize ourselves in the above—we, the educators—the commanders at the helm in our little homes away from home. Most professionals, however—especially those in the business world—are organized into teams, and when individuals within the team take turns at the helm, they do so within the team’s presence, they take actions reflective of the team’s planning, and they present their individual efforts only within the larger context of the team’s intended goals.

Certainly teachers do work within departments and divisions for a common school mission, but by comparison to most professionals, the irony of the teaching profession comes across clearly—in a place where we teach students to prepare for a “dynamic global world,” we ourselves seldom collaborate. While many schools admirably incorporate “team teaching,” the traditional method of one teacher to many students prevails, and there is little room, budget, or patience for collaboration on a larger scale—unless . . . we learn from our students and take the lessons they learn, with our prompting, to heart.

It is a different world. It is indeed a changing dynamic one, and adoption of a “global perspective” is to every teacher’s benefit. With the expansion of web technology, it is no longer unheard of for our students to have “friends” who live across oceans from them and whom they have never spoken to in person. And yet, relationships in the most traditional forms of the word, do transpire. And these kids are sharing—they’re sharing codes, resources and techniques. “How did you get that background? What code allows you to become invisible? That’s awesome—what’s the web site?”

In the school where I teach, my division meets often and my one fellow English colleague and I do try to coordinate our scope and sequence, but for the most part, I am cut off from the rest of my colleagues for much of my day. But I am a strong proponent of collaboration, nonetheless, and so, for the last two years, my seventh grade class at The Colorado Springs School has joined an online collaboration effort spearheaded by Media Specialist, Nancy Anthony, in the Marblehead School District of Massachusetts. Anthony built a blog and wiki to facilitate collaboration between students reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

My students were engaged—they were excited about “chatting” with students so far away and because the schools were so very different demographically, the influence of varying perspectives added to each student’s understanding of the novel. The unit is something I could not possibly be as successful with as the sole teacher. Students can surprise us—but we have let them do so. There must be unknown “wobble-room” in our planning.

Collaboration, especially online collaboration, is a powerful tool, and it is time we let our students join us in determining the outcomes of their own learning. Marblehead is just one of many such online collaborative initiatives. It’s a little scary handing over some of our power to our own students, but ownership of learning is a proven value in education—and collaboration, whether between teachers in the same school or within a larger digital community, is one of the most accessible means to facilitating that ownership.