

Flattening Classroom Walls: Edmodo Takes Teaching and Learning across the Globe

by Elizabeth Dobler

Meriden, Kansas, population 813, may be a small town, but Jan Wells, a fourth grade teacher at West Jefferson Elementary, has transformed it into a World Capital. By skillful use of the educational website Edmodo, www.edmodo.com, Jan and her students have raised the roof of their classroom, flattened the walls, and brought voices from communities far and wide into their daily learning.

Access to this free online community, with over four million users, begins with a teacher creating an account. Through this account, a teacher can access numerous tools which facilitate learning and collaboration for students within a classroom, and with students from other classrooms, both near and far. In addition, a teacher can connect with other educators to learn more about topics of interest and seek answers to questions about teaching and learning.

Communicate, Collaborate, Create

Jan uses Edmodo to provide a variety of rich encounters for her students. One such project, Global Read Aloud, involves teachers from different schools reading the same book, as students discuss it through blogging, video conferencing, or online discussions. Jan read aloud the book for older students in the 2011 project about *Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt, while the book *Flat Stanley* by Jeff Brown was the project choice for

younger readers. Over 2,000 students from around the world participated in this collaborative project.

In another project, Jan used Edmodo to merge her classroom with that of a fourth grade teacher from Louisiana, Paula Naugle. When Paula hosted a guest speaker in her classroom, she invited Jan's class to join the presentation through video conferencing using Skype. While the guest speaker shared information about the Constitution, a handful of students in both Jan's and Paula's classroom were using Edmodo to backchannel or carry on an online conversation about the spoken remarks.

Together, these students virtually created a record of the information shared by the presenter, brought up questions to ask at the end of the presentation, and located web links to further information related to the presentation.

Instructional Hub

In Jan's classroom, Edmodo has become the hub of instructional information, meaning a place where ideas, resources, and a record of learning are collected and stored for all to access. Students are actively involved in preparing for their classroom lessons, and a sense of excitement for learning builds among the children and the teacher during this early stage of the unit. As Jan says, "I try to think about—when I am planning—what I can use to tie



Fourth grade teacher Jan Wells

their experiences or their learning with what is shared on Edmodo, whether it's me giving information or them finding information, and then tying it all to real life."

For example, prior to beginning a new topic in science or social studies, or a new book in shared reading, Jan uses Edmodo to introduce new concepts and vocabulary through links to a video clip, image, article, or website. Students are encouraged to explore, often choosing a multimedia resource which matches their learning needs and preferences. Jan encourages students to use the resources to activate their prior knowledge or make predictions about possible information in the unit of study on which the class is about to embark.

During a structured work time, Jan provides the fourth graders with instructions for specific activities to be completed with a partner. Half of the students will visit the website Spelling City to access this week's list of spelling words, play a game with the words on the Spelling City website, and then write a poem using

Resource Links

Explore these sights to learn more about the resources referenced in this article:

Edmodo

www.edmodo.com

Spelling City

www.spellingcity.com

Global Read Aloud Project

<http://globalreadaloud.wikispaces.com>

the spelling words. The other half of the students will watch a video clip about elapsed time, a topic in the fourth grade math curriculum, and then complete an activity Jan has designed. For both groups, their final product will be posted in Edmodo for classmates to see.

Tiger Talk

A visitor to Jan's classroom would see students using Edmodo for multiple reasons in various subject areas on almost a daily basis. To encourage the building of connections with her students and between students in the class, Jan initiated Tiger Talk, a name stemming from the school's mascot. Tiger Talk is a written conversation about a current topic, such as the local high school's Friday night football game or travel plans for the Thanksgiving holiday, which begins in the classroom and often extends out of the classroom to the Internet at home. Personal connections are made and friendships are extended in a social networking environment under the watchful eye of the teacher. Thus, children have the opportunity to learn the important skills of netiquette before they participate in the wide-open Internet on their own.

Internet Safety

Teachers and parents may be concerned about security and privacy



A fourth grader refers to Edmodo for project instructions posted by her teacher, Jan Wells

issues for communicating with people online. Edmodo is a closed and private community, and students can only access Edmodo through a teacher's account and the class code given directly by the teacher. This code can also be given to parents, who can have a bird's eye view of the instructional activities occurring within Edmodo. The eyes of the teacher, parents, and students are on the discussion postings, and any improper comments can be deleted by the teacher or addressed by the group.

In fact, Jan believes it's this availability which creates a strong sense of audience among her students. Both she and the students want their work to be top-notch quality because others will see it. According to Jan, "Students monitor each other, not so much in a tattletale way, but in recognition that this work is part of our learning. It's not a game."

Creating a Personal Learning Network

Not all of the learning and instructional value of Edmodo occurs for the students. Edmodo offers several tools for teachers to customize their own



Jan serves as the facilitator while a group works on an online spelling project

personal learning network. Online educational communities promote the exchange of ideas about a specific topic, such as language arts, technology, or special education. Teachers can join these communities, post comments, ask questions, or just sit back and read the discussion of others. The online collaboration and communication facilitated by Edmodo has brought a renewed sense of enthusiasm to Jan's own teaching and learning. When a teacher such as Jan who has been in the classroom for 31 years says, "I love technology," one can sense the power of integrating technology with teaching and learning.

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