Making the Most of

*Class websites can serve a variety of purposes.
What do you want to do with yours?*

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Students today are electronically connected, and they expect their learning to be connected as well. Many college students prefer online classes, even if they live on campus. Students who do take face-to-face classes often expect the class to have an online communication component (such as a discussion board). However, despite the fact that K–12 teachers have easy access to technologies to prepare students for this style of learning, they often fail to use them. One easy way to incorporate technology to extend learning is through a class website.

For years, teachers have been encouraged or required to post class websites. Yet many of these websites are nothing more than online newsletters. Although such websites are somewhat helpful, those that are integrated into the curriculum and modified to include two-way communication are much more valuable.

Determining Your Purpose

The first thing to consider when building a class website is its purpose. Effective sites are not defined as much by their components as by whether they are achieving their purpose. Do you want to ensure that students and parents are up-to-date with happenings in the classroom? Provide resources that will help students complete their assignments? Create a space for interaction about what students are learning? Is the purpose to provide information and deliver additional resources, to act as a platform for turning in assignments, to increase discussion time, or to achieve some combination of these and other aims?

A typical class website serves one or more of the following purposes: to disseminate static information, to share news and other changing information, to provide resources related to course content, to facilitate interaction, and to act as a growing repository of knowledge related to the course.[1] Depending on their purpose, sites typically fall into one of the following five categories.

Level 1: Static

The purpose of a static website is to disseminate information that doesn't change, the kind of information a teacher might send home on the first day of school. Such websites often contain the teacher's name and contact information, the class rules and expectations, the syllabus, the class schedule, and notes to parents. Many districts require teachers to create these kinds of sites as a first step toward increasing online communication with parents and the community. Because you would, in general, only update this level of website at the beginning of the school year, the time commitment is minimal.

Although part of an extensive and complex education website, the page titled Meet Mrs. Renz (www.mrsrenz .net/mrsrenz.htm) is an example of a good Level 1 site. It features a photo and bio of 4th grade teacher Heather Renz, but it does not include specific information about her current class or the curriculum she is teaching.

Level 2: Semistatic

A Level 2 site disseminates information that changes periodically. These sites typically contain information found in Level 1 sites as well as announcements of upcoming school events, schedule changes, class news, photos, and awards or recognitions. If you choose to build this kind of site, you would update it only when you have new information to share. This may be several times a week or a few times each month.

To see an example of a Level 2 website, visit Mrs. Doerge's Class Website at www.kdoerge.com/student art.html. Here you'll see photos of students working on art projects and examples of completed student work.

Level 1 and Level 2 websites do not include curriculum content, and the communication is one-way. Although helpful for building classroom community and keeping parents and students informed, these sites are not

Your Cl@ss Website

respond directly to the curricular questions, this would be considered a Level 4 website.

Level 4: Integral Curricular
Teacher-created Level 4 websites are not much harder to produce than Level 3 sites. They are still fairly uncommon but are growing in number. These sites, which may or may not include information from the first three levels, focus on the curriculum and student learning. Two-way communication related to the curriculum gives these sites their value. Because the information on these sites is integral to the curriculum, student interaction is expected and required.

On a Level 4 site, teachers often post a higher-order curriculum-related question every week or so and require students to post a response. Students might also post their own questions for other students to answer. These questions and answers can develop into deeper discussions than classroom time would allow. They also sometimes reveal misconceptions you would not have otherwise discovered, making the class website a valuable formative assessment tool. To get the greatest benefit from the site, you would need to monitor it frequently, probably daily.

Blogs, wikis, and discussion boards are the most common platforms for these sites. See http://mrlicata.ning.com for an example of a Level 4 website for a math class. The site includes a discussion forum, videos and photos by both the teacher and students, and a space for students to write their own blog posts and respond to posts by their classmates and the teacher.

designed to enhance student learning. For that you will need to create a Level 3, 4, or 5 site.

Level 3: Supplemental Resource
Level 3 sites often contain information typical of Level 1 and 2 sites, but they also include links to teacher-created resources (such as study guides and outlines) and outside resources related to the curriculum (such as games, puzzles, videos, and the course textbook site). You would update a Level 3 site whenever existing links cease to function or when you create or find new resources that you want students to use, typically every 2–6 weeks. Student use at this level may be optional, encouraged, or required.

An example of a simple blog-based Level 3 website is at http://mrmccoys class.blogspot.com. As you scroll through the posts, you'll see several possible curricular uses of a blog, such as extra credit assignments, book recommendations, and videos related to course content. Note that all the communication is one-way. If the teacher invited or required comments or used a wiki on which the students could

Level 5: Pedagogical Memory
A Level 5 website acts as a dynamic knowledge repository for the course. These websites are similar to Level 4 websites, but the students take an even more active role in directing their own learning. Students collaborate to solve problems and answer one another's questions; and their additions, deletions, corrections, or enhancements of content on the site add to the body of knowledge in the course. Such sites can replicate and extend classroom discussions or serve as a site for problem-solving activities and extended projects. You might also integrate lower-order activities—such as turning in homework assignments—into the site, enabling you to access student work from anywhere. Students who are out of class for an extended illness or travels with family can also use the site to stay up-to-date on some of their assignments.

These sites preserve prior work that is used as a springboard for future work. Students make additions, deletions, corrections, or enhancements to the body of knowledge in the course, and they collaborate to solve problems requiring higher-level thinking. These changes often strengthen the site for future use. Although examples of Level 5 sites exist, most are password-protected and available only to students in those classes and their parents.

For these sites to work well, the teacher must invest time in the site each day, and all students will need com-puter access. Plus, the school culture must invite student-directed learning in which the teacher acts as a facilitator, guiding and encouraging deeper discussions with well-placed, open-ended questions.

Getting Started
To determine what type of site is most appropriate, you will need to take several factors into consideration. First is the time required to maintain the site. Levels 4 and 5 offer the greatest benefits to learning, but they require regular monitoring and updating to be most effective. You can recoup some of this time by replacing existing activities with Internet-based ones; for example, students could participate in a book discussion online instead of during class.

If you intend to require interaction with the website, you will need to ensure that all students have sufficient access and online savvy to do any web-based work you require. As Internet access becomes more ubiquitous, this will be less of an issue; but for now, it is important to keep this in mind.

Finally, you will need to be ready for a paradigm shift if you are creating an interactive Level 4 or 5 website. The value of these websites will depend on your ability to foster interaction with and among students. Training and administrative support are crucial to encouraging teachers to develop and effectively use such websites.

The actual construction and maintenance of a site is relatively simple, thanks to the many free and easy-to-use software platforms available today. Many teachers use programs like Moodle (http://moodle.org) to create Level 4 and 5 websites. Wikispaces (http://www.wikispaces.com/content/for/teachers) is a platform for creating interactive wikis; and Blogger (www

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.blogger.com) and Wordpress (www.wordpress.com) are widely used free platforms for creating blogs. These sites typically provide instructions that are clear enough for a beginner.
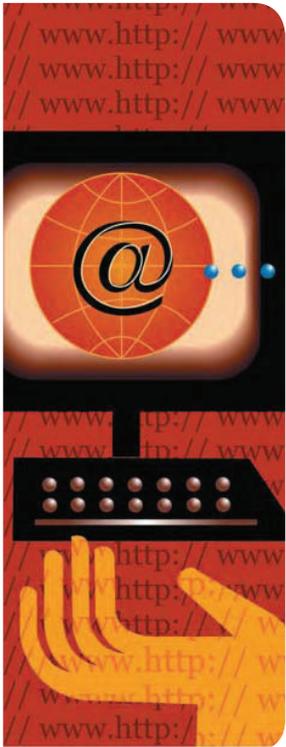
If you're just getting started, district technology personnel should be available to help with setting up a site. Teachers who are already integrating blogs, discussion boards, and other forms of online interaction into their regular course activities can act as models and mentors to their less experienced colleagues.

Preparing Students for the Future
Using higher-level websites at the K–12 level is a valuable way to extend learning past the school day, but they also support lifelong learning. Blended learning environments are becoming more common at the postsecondary level, some degrees and certifications are now available only through distance learning, and corporations are using online courses for professional development. The more K–12 educators integrate online learning into class activities, the more they will be preparing their students for the learning they are likely to be doing in the future. What better way is there to serve our students? **EL**

[1]Dunn, L., & Peet, M. (2010). A taxonomy of teacher-created class websites: Increasing the educational value of class websites. In D. Gibson & B. Dodge (Eds.), *Proceedings of Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education International Conference 2010* (pp. 420–422). Chesapeake, VA: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education.

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