Skype and the Embedded Librarian

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Abstract

Retired school librarian Diane Cordell is cultivating a network of learning partnerships around the globe to teach students of all ages the art of photography and digital storytelling. Diane shares how she established these collaborative relationships with teachers and librarians and how her role as an embedded librarian has supported passion-based learning and created virtually connected communities of learners.

The embedded model of librarianship incorporates a number of elements, including teamwork, content knowledge, accessibility, adaptability, and responsiveness. In order to function effectively as an embedded librarian, it may be necessary to step outside of one's comfort zone and experiment a bit.

In my professional life, I've found that Skype, a free software application that allows users to make voice calls over the Internet, is a very effective means of connecting with other librarians, teachers, and students. Skype made its debut in 2002 and has attracted an increasing number of users. Its audio and video capabilities provide a simple yet engaging way for teacher-librarians to become partners in learning experiences anywhere in the world. Users may simply talk, add a video component, or share their screen with others. The chat option enables them to exchange links and other written information.

Some librarians use Skype as an alternative to the expense of sponsoring a school author visit. They access the Skype an Author Network, locate the name of a participating writer, and make arrangements for a free virtual visit. Others librarians help their students find experts who can add authenticity and real-world experience to research projects. The flexibility of Skype allows for a rich diversity of interaction: between teacher and librarian, librarian and librarian, librarian and student, expert and student, or student and student. It is the perfect vehicle for creating conversations for learning as an embedded librarian.

> *Skype an Author Network*
> http://skypeanauthor.wetpaint.com

Social networking is a powerful medium for connecting "untethered" embedded librarians like myself, who are semiretired and no longer working in a classroom setting yet who want to remain professionally involved, who strive for continued growth as librarians, and who are looking to connect with classroom teachers and support learning experiences for their students. Through my online networks like Twitter, I'm able to interact with other educators. Contacts made on Twitter, an increasingly mainstream microblogging platform, often lead to invitations to "visit" libraries and classrooms via Skype. Though Twitter messages are limited to 140 characters, this service offers an easy way to communicate, share resources, and locate content experts.

Partnerships for Learning around the Globe

International school teacher Clay Burell initiated my first embedded activity on Skype. His Korean students were starting passion-based projects on a wide range of topics. They needed subject area experts, so Clay turned to his online network and recruited volunteers

via Twitter. The student who contacted me was interested in creating a plan for an American-themed restaurant. We Skyped for about twenty minutes as I answered her questions about typical US recipes, and we brainstormed menu ideas. By looking beyond his physical space and expanding his professional team, Clay was able to offer his class richer, more authentic learning opportunities.

My next embedded experience involved another online friend and colleague. Terry Shay, an adjunct instructor at the Upper Iowa University–Waterloo Center, asked me to speak with his adult students in an introduction to computers class. These preservice undergraduate students had questions about libraries, research, and collaboration, which I was happy to address. It was especially gratifying to share information with this demographic since it offered me the opportunity to foster a positive attitude towards librarians at the very start of some teaching careers.

Skype has allowed me to embed myself as a storyteller and instructor with elementary school teacher Amanda Marrinan's students. Amanda Marrinan, who teaches year 2 students in St. John Vianney's Primary School in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, is a teacher I met through another social networking site, Plurk. My visit to her classroom (see figure 1) was an interesting cultural experience for me, and seeing all the students in their uniforms reminded me of my own parochial school background. Because of the time difference, I've Skyped with Amanda's class only one time, although future visits are a possibility. It's easy to forget that not all children's literature originates in the United States. Sharing favorite stories with students in another country is a broadening experience for all parties involved.

The most intensive embedded experiences I've had to date involve two fellow librarians, Shannon M. Miller and John Schumacher. The three of us met face-to-face for the first time at the *School Library Journal* Leadership Summit in 2010. Although Shannon is a K–12 librarian in Iowa and John is an elementary librarian in Illinois, they began a partnership that essentially involves embedding themselves in each other's library programs. They Skype as needed, weekly at a minimum, to coplan and then coteach lessons. A typical instructional unit might involve creating parallel projects, then connecting and sharing visually on Skype, as they did on September 15, 2011, for International Dot Day, a celebration of creativity inspired by Peter Reynolds's book *The Dot.* Shannon and John have a collaborative blog, *Two Libraries One Voice*, to archive the products of this partnership.
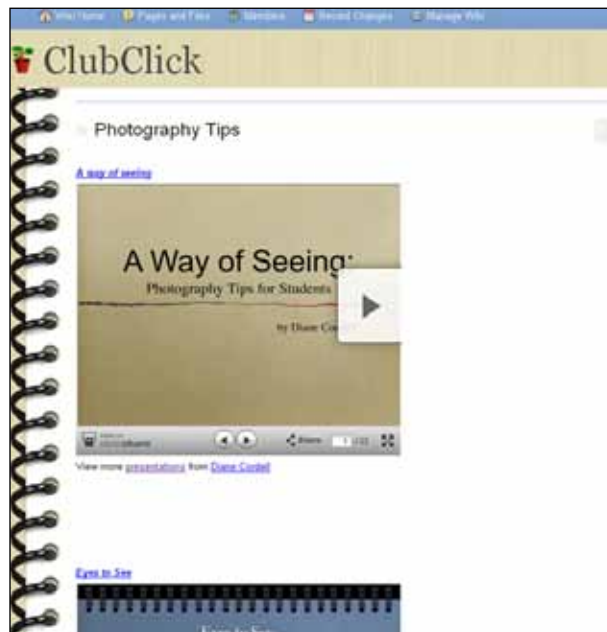

Figure 1
Club Click

At the same time that these two young librarians were becoming an instructional team, Shannon and I decided to start a photography club, which our founding group of students named Club Click. As with John, Shannon and I are separated geographically, split between Iowa and upstate New York, but Skype makes our collaboration viable. As the lead teacher, Shannon describes the desired activity, and we set up a time to connect (always keeping in mind those pesky time zone variations). For example, at the beginning of the school year, I might use Skype's screen-sharing option to present a slideshow containing basic tips on photography to new club members. If any students have further questions or need additional information, Shannon arranges to have them Skype again during a study hall or after school. We keep Club Click resources and student photography projects on a wiki, where Shannon and some of the other librarians who have joined us, or plan to in the near future (John in Illinois, Jennifer Malphy in Wisconsin, Kathy Schmidt in Georgia, and classroom teacher Stephen Gagnon in New Hampshire), have their own pages with editing rights. Our goal with Club Click is to introduce photography as a useful skill while hopefully inspiring in some students a lifelong passion for capturing digital images. In a delightful turnabout, one of our Club Click student members copresented at a conference with Shannon and Skyped me in to describe our club and how it worked.

Two Libraries One Voice
http://twolibrariesonevoice.blogspot.com

Club Click wiki
http://clubclick.wikispaces.com

One size, of course, never fits all, and policies vary with each school. In some districts, students old enough to have Google accounts (ages 13 and older) are allowed to post their photographs directly to Flickr (an online photo archiving site) accounts. Other administrations prefer that the librarian or teacher in charge of the local club handle that process. Similarly, one district may permit identifiable students' faces to appear in public venues, while others expressly forbid this practice. It's possible to work within the framework of such regulations. For example, if children are not allowed to publicly share photos of their friends for a project, they can focus on objects, pets, nature, and so on and still have a rewarding experience. Not every library owns sets of cameras, but sharing equipment for a group project is an easy fix. In addition, many students have their own devices, including smartphones with photography capabilities. Learning how to use this technology is another useful life skill.

These connections with Shannon led me, in due time, back to our mutual friend John Schumacher. I have Skyped with his classes numerous times, sometimes reading to them, as I did recently for Picture Book Month, sometimes providing an appreciative audience for their stories and artwork. On International Dot Day (see figure 2), children in John's classes proudly displayed the dot compositions they had created on their iPads. I, in turn, produced a short Animoto video clip for them, featuring photographs of "dots and spots" found in nature (on a ladybug, butterfly, jellyfish, flowers, etc., even including my polka-dotted pink rain boots, much to their delight). For Poem in Your Pocket Day, we all shared favorite poems, taking turns reading and reciting them to each other. During a spring celebration, I showed students a collection of historic Children's Book Week posters, and then they read Peter Brown's *Children Make Terrible Pets* to me.

Typically, John, Shannon, and whoever else is planning to be involved make initial contact on Twitter or Skype. The ideas for projects come from various sources: a school's curriculum, John's extensive knowledge of children's literature, Shannon's love of art and illustration, or websites like Anita Silvey's Children's Book-A-Day Almanac. Once an activity is decided upon, John starts a Google Docs document to coordinate dates and times for participating librarians and their classes, with appropriate conversions for the variety of geographic locations involved. After the schedule is set, each of us adds the activity to whatever type of calendar we use. On the day of the virtual visit, all parties check in via Skype chat before the interaction with students is due to begin to make sure there will be no problem connecting that day.

Figure 2
Diane Cordell and John Schumacher (a.k.a. Mr. Schu) collaborating via Skype

It never hurts to have a backup plan. In my most recent virtual visit with one of John's younger classes, Skype's screen-sharing option wouldn't work. Fortunately, I had saved the slides I planned to use as a presentation in Google Docs, and once I provided the link, John was able to run the slideshow while I added voice commentary. Other options would be to upload presentations to SlideShare beforehand or plan alternative activities to accommodate either audiovisual or audio-only modes.

Reflections

The students with whom I've interacted have, without exception, been enthusiastic and appreciative. The younger ones enjoy having a visitor who is there just for fun: no grades, no consequences, just sharing a story or some photographs, almost like a grandparent. Older students appreciate the egalitarian nature of our time together. Members of Club Click are co-experts; sometimes I share tips with them, other times they share photos with me. All ages like the "cool" factor of connecting via Skype.

While these interactions are satisfying on a purely social level, I'd like to think that they have many layers of meaning. Since I'm no longer working in a school district, my contribution to the collaboration is different, but just as real: I help to bridge not only space, but time.

I can offer these young people a window on another world, primary source information about the America of the 1950s through the present. My perspective is necessarily shaped by my experiences, and I'm able to

relate this different viewpoint via stories, conversations, and personal mementos. Educators love to toss around the term *lifelong learners*; I am able to model that for students, letting them see my excitement in exploring new ideas and acquiring new skills. Our nation is getting grayer, and tolerance is a two-way street. Mature adults need to value the young, and children and young adults should understand that growing older does not mean withdrawing from life and learning.

One of John Schumacher's elementary children asked him why I was Skyping with their class since I was retired. He explained that Mrs. Cordell was still interested in libraries and books and missed having her own students. Retirees are a great untapped resource for schools, a vast living database of information and expertise. Those of us who choose to remain active in our profession must vigorously seek out opportunities for involvement.

Conclusions

I'm not a "tools" person; I'm a learning person. However, when I discover a way to extend and enrich my professional life, I hop right on board. Skype enables me to explore many of the facets of embedded librarianship. I can use Skype to build meaningful relationships, provide support, share—and construct—content knowledge, and interact at time of need. The technical requirements are simple: a computer with Internet access and a built-in or external microphone and (optional) web camera. Skype is free to download for computer-to-computer calls; there are additional paid options for connecting from your computer to phones or mobile devices.

Being an embedded librarian means integrating yourself into a classroom and becoming an essential partner in instruction. Once, this would have been possible only if all participants shared the same location. Now, thanks to options like Skype, there are no such constraints.

The walls are down. All that's required is the desire to engage and a willingness to step outside of your comfort zone. None of us are experts on everything, but everyone is an expert on something. Use what you've learned, and learn more in the process. The profession of librarianship is evolving, and rather than fear the change, we should embrace it.

It's not difficult to make yourself "embeddable." It's possible, of course, to physically insert yourself into a classroom or library. You might post on local library listservs or contact regional directors to explore volunteer options. I would strongly urge you, however, to consider using tools like Skype to broaden your horizons. This would not only offer more opportunities to interact in meaningful ways, but also mitigate some of every district's facility security concerns.

Once you've downloaded Skype to your computer, a fairly simple process, make your availability known. On social networking sites, if you see educators mention a project that interests you, ask if they'd like you to join them. Attend a conference—most offer discounted retiree rates and it's a great chance to travel—and make new face-to-face connections. Hand out business cards and contact information, noting that you'd love to become a virtual mentor. Be available, be user-friendly, be flexible.

Embed yourself in a classroom, in *many* classrooms. Make the world your library and be a librarian to the world.