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Collaborating with Colleagues Using Web Tools

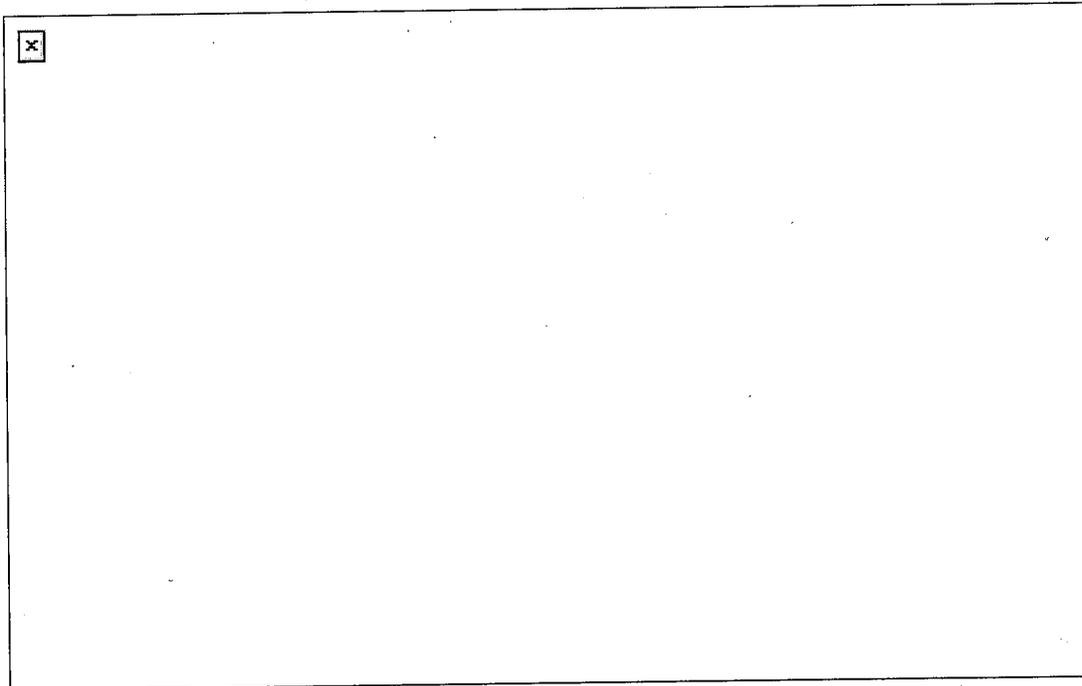
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Classroom teachers are working harder than ever. The demands of state testing, covering a broad curriculum, and meeting the individual needs of the students have created an environment that challenges even the most skillful teachers. I find part of my job as a principal is to ensure professional development is meaningful, since our time together is scarce. We no longer have to gather teachers in a room to receive a one-size fits all form of professional development, nor would we want to most of the time. Now teachers have opportunities to reflect about what they need, and to choose the learning experiences that best meet those needs.

One of my highest priorities these days is harnessing technology to provide options for staff collaboration. Collaboration promotes thoughtful solutions to the challenges we face, and it also helps us build the collective wisdom that defines our learning community.

Building Collective Wisdom in a Web 2.0 World

One web tool that we have used to collaborate and collect our ideas is Stixy (www.stixy.com). Our school's literacy team (comprised of teachers, specialists, and administrators) has been promoting choice as a critical aspect of learning and teaching. In order to gather broader perspectives on choice, we decided to post a question on Stixy and invite teachers to respond with their thoughts about choice in reading workshops. The question was "What does it mean to give kids CHOICE in your classroom as it relates to literacy?" The screen capture below shows some of the responses. This tool encouraged us to develop a more common vision of how we could offer more choices to the students in our classes, as well as a healthy respect for different opinions among colleagues.



Stixy requires that you invite people you want to respond by sending them an email.

A similar tool is Wallwisher (<http://wallwisher.com/>). The positive feature of this application is that when inviting teachers to post their ideas, individual e-mail addresses are not required. Simply send the URL to teachers and ask them to participate.

Imagine the possibilities for professional development with these tools. We can share ideas without scheduling a time and place to meet, and everyone has an opportunity to participate. Those staff members who may be a bit shy to share their ideas in a meeting may be more comfortable posting ideas in this platform.

I also encourage teachers to consider using these tools in their classrooms. Students might use these virtual boards to reflect or respond to a book or a lesson activity and read the insights of their peers. There are all kinds of examples on the web of these classroom-based applications.

Sharing Information

We no longer have to write a memo or run the copier (and waste paper) to share information with others. There are so many platforms for posting information.

This year I started a Moodle (<http://moodle.org/>), which is essentially an online course management system. I chose it as a way of gathering a variety of resources and links for teachers on the staff. While we are not using Moodle for course management, it does offer a way to collect and share information that is important for learning and teaching. Some of the posts highlight Web 2.0 tools that teachers can integrate into classroom learning.

Members of the Moodle can read posts and reply. Some posts have inspired thoughtful discussions about a particular topic. Members can also post to the Moodle and start their own topics for discussion. Our Moodle is not public, so it is a place where our staff can feel comfortable about participating in conversations without a public audience.

Blogs and wikis are other platforms for sharing information. Some of our teachers started a wiki to collect suggestions for mentor texts. Several staff members have established blogs or wikis to post information about their classes for parents. A good place to learn about wikis is www.wikispaces.com, and you can read "Eight Ways to Use School Wikis" at <http://www.techlearning.com/article/22064> to gather some ideas on how to get started using wikis in your learning community.

Other members of our staff have created public blogs that have become popular nationally and globally. Each blog has a focus but many of the posts are about children's books, learning and teaching. I regularly follow several blogs, but my favorites are A Year of Reading (<http://readingyear.blogspot.com/>), Literate Lives (<http://literateives.blogspot.com/>), Creative Literacy (<http://creativeliteracy.blogspot.com/>) and Authentic Learner (<http://authenticlearner.blogspot.com/>).

Collaboration is the foundation for meaningful professional growth and change in schools. Digital tools are helping me move beyond thinking of face-to-face staff meetings as the only, or even the best, place for thoughtful conversations about literacy learning.

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