

# Authenticity in an age of illusion

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In a world where students are engulfed by illusion from advertising to cyberspace, the value of providing a classroom learning environment that focuses on authentic experiences cannot be underestimated. Our students need guidance and encouragement in this multi-focused twenty-first century so that they can achieve not only breadth but also depth in their understanding of such a complex universe. Ultimately they must be capable of communicating that knowledge and appreciation readily to others. IT provides that ideal technology for the teacher who will adopt it and adapt it to build a bridge to the future for students.

IT by its multi-faceted nature encourages new ways to convey academic skills, new methodologies through which students can work, and offers topicality through the Internet. It is easier than ever to gather all sorts of information from different perspectives; the students are no longer dependent on physical libraries or out of date textbooks. Via email or conference systems, the students can engage in a quality of dialogue that is highly motivating. Furthermore, IT is ideal when it comes to establishing a collaborative learning environment: for students, by making it easy to connect to other schools, and also for teachers, when they are planning joint lessons for their crossnational classes. All of these aspects must be seriously considered and implemented in the virtual classroom.

This article is about 'Schoolconnexion', a joint literature, issues based and student learning exchange program between

Applewood Heights Secondary School near Toronto and Nordsjællands Grundskole og Gymnasium (NGG) near Copenhagen. The program uses IT as a base and our platform is our website, Schoolconnexion (<http://Schoolconnexion.org>), built around a conference system where all online activities amongst the students take place. Our joint study, started in the early 90s, has gone through great changes in both technological development and curriculum design. Our focus has never been on IT for its own sake; instead, we have always been focused on creating a learning environment where IT can be used to enhance the academic and social skills of students to prepare them to be global citizens.

More about this later but first some information about how it all started:

When we look back at the early 90s when we began our joint project, it's amazing to see how far the technological development has taken us. Today we have the Internet, and the WWW is full of websites containing pictures, video clips, slide shows, chat facilities etc. And every day new features are being added at incredible speed.

Our very first IT tool back in 92 was a Macintosh computer hooked up to a single telephone line via a very slow modem. But it worked for us and, even with what is now old-fashioned equipment, we were able to provide marvellous experiences for our students.

But perhaps we should start by introducing ourselves. We' are presently four teachers

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from Applewood Heights Secondary School and NGG who all share the same enthusiasm for technology and especially the way IT can be implemented in the curriculum. Our first communication was established via AGE (a network set up by Apple Computer called Apple Global Education) and our classes used email to connect: exchanging essays and responding to assignments. For the first year or so this joint study approach worked well, but soon the Internet and the WWW grew with an unforeseen speed and completely new possibilities presented themselves to us in websites that could be designed to suit the needs of our program. Thus in 97, we launched our first website and, even though it was a static page which only contained basic information, the fact that the students now had a common 'meeting place' was a significant improvement. However, we wanted our students to be able to exchange information directly online and the next step was to build a conference system so that students as well as teachers had their own forums where all sorts of topics could be discussed. The conferences have proved to be a major step towards creating a virtual classroom in which the students feel that there is real interaction and where they can engage in authentic discussions almost as if they were sitting in their own classroom.

In sum, our evolution has been from simple email exchanges in the early 90s to a multi-purpose website built on a conference system that includes chats, pictures and webcams. In building the website (an ongoing process), we are trying to mirror the structure of the traditional school. Our website is divided mainly into two parts: one for teachers and one for students. In the students' area, there is one section dedicated to schoolwork called 'My Area'

and one personal section called 'Bistro'. We want to give our students a 'sense of community' and interactivity; and, while we still see the students' exchanges/travels as strong links between our classes, onsite forums designed for students to communicate freely are most important when they are not meeting each other in the real world. Therefore, we have implemented features such as an elaborate conference system in which the students can discuss and reflect upon all sorts of topics both related to their studies but also so that they are able to communicate personally without interjection from their teachers. In order for this level of communication to work successfully, we have found that just having a conference system is not enough. We must also provide the students with a sense of 'nearness' and immediacy. Thus on the site in addition to the conferences there are also chat facilities and a kind of ICQ feature where students can see who is online and send immediate messages back and forth. This last feature is very popular and one that has added significantly to establishing the community feeling that we find so important. What we are currently adding as the technology advances is webcam usage so that the students will be able to discuss issues live.

Today the technology is so far advanced that almost anything seems possible but the overall question still remains: how can IT and the Internet with its great potential be an active learning tool, not a passive medium comparable to video and taperecorders which have students watching and listening. We want our students to be interactive in their usage of IT, an important issue that we will also consider in this article.

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### **What do we teach? Some of the practical aspects of literature instruction**

One of the current literary works in our joint curriculum is “King Lear”. Over the years of our joint Shakespeare study, we have amended and added to the project. This is how far we have come:

We prepare the students for their understanding of the play as we have always done; there is no mystery here. In the school year 2001-2002, we began reading the play right after the October holidays and finished it in the last days of November. While reading the play and talking about it, we also watched and discussed a film version of ‘King Lear’ to note how a director interpreted the text to make it live for his audience. In the two closing weeks of our studies, we had two weeks to work closely with the text before all students, Canadians and Danes alike, would be busy writing their Independent Study Units and afterwards celebrating the holiday season.

### **From the teacher’s perspective**

The first step was to give the students a list of essay topics that we found relevant for the understanding of the play and have them sign up for one of these while seeing to it that the topics were divided evenly among the students of each class.

In the first week of the assignment, each group found a number of quotations important to a consideration of the chosen topic. The students were expected to post these quotations and, at the same time, add comments, explanations and ask questions of others working on the same topic. They were also expected to find contemporary comparisons, even quotations if possible, that fit their topic.

In the second week each student of each group must write an essay on their topic involving a discussion of the relevance of Shakespeare for contemporary students and quotations from the research of the previous week.

During the first week of school after December holidays, the students were expected to read all essays by others on the same topic. They assessed what was common and what was different in the various responses and as a group wrote a 400 word critical response in which they reached a conclusion regarding the topic as such. Once again some quotations from the essays were included as proof.

What with new laptops and good computer facilities, the organization of this project has been easy and smooth-running. The students feel the authenticity of the conference, which in itself is a motivating factor. By reading the other responses, the students developed an insight into what is relevant and what isn’t and they now see that the writing process as a progressive experience. Many students also feel that it is easier to express themselves freely in the conference rather than in class. Quiet students have better opportunities; they can add comments at their own pace. It is advantageous for students to learn both to give and to take advice from fellow students. At the end of this stage of the joint project, the students appear to have acquired real insight into “King Lear” and depth and precision of their postings indicate the growth in their proficiency in both writing and ‘speaking online’.

### **Global issues**

Along with their joint literature studies, each year the students explore a relevant global issue. Whether our discussions

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challenge the issues which are inherent in such topics as freedom, cloning, global warming or violence among youth in the world, students learn that local factors influence global perspectives and that the individual can make a difference if he or she decides to speak.

In 2000, for example, when the Danish students came to Canada with their teachers in September, Applewood and NGG students met for a joint session on “Youth, Violence and the Media” with a focus on the question of how to make schools safer for students. In preparation, students watched a CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) video which summarized recent events and perspectives on youth violence in North American schools, and students discussed three articles to focus attention on the topic with some common ground.

The next day, three panelists presented different perspectives on the issues: an editor with The Toronto Star, the President of the Canadian Safe Schools Network and an attorney from the Ontario Crown Attorney’s office. After a question and answer period, students worked in groups to develop five recommendations which were to be a five-point action plan that, if implemented, could make schools safer places.

These recommendations were posted on our website by each group and when the Danes left Canada, the students continued the joint project on our website. The students were asked to examine with the rest of the group questions that they might be interested in exploring with reference to the topic: youth, violence and the media. After much brainstorming and sharing of findings through research on the internet,

the students were finally required to submit individual work, viz. a proposal in which they had to influence someone of authority (a mayor, a principal, etc.) to change, modify or adopt some policies or plans based on the students’ findings.

Just before the Canadian students visited Denmark in March, there had been another tragic school shooting in the USA. When the two groups of students met for their joint project in Denmark, they were asked to read an article on the Santee school shooting and then discuss a question assigned to their group. The groups were given questions such as: “What cultural norms impede us from reacting when we suspect a violent act will occur?” and “Is it necessary to circumnavigate many of the rights and freedoms of individuals to sustain a ‘just’ society?”

The discussion that ensued among the students proved to us that our social activist stance appeals to students and that we should continue to develop a curriculum in which we consider major societal issues. Every year we see how the students find their voices. Collectively they determine that they vary little on issues of equity, race and culture; they want a better world with fair treatment and opportunities for all. The students explore issues with conviction and seek answers with zeal. Danes and Canadians may not always agree on how to reach a solution, but they come to respect the reasons for the differences in point of view.

Used in this way, IT may, we believe, add to and expand the traditional classroom by giving students the possibility to engage in authentic discussions about topical issues. Accuracy, correctness and argumentation are necessary in order to make direct and

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persuasive statements. With IT, learning has the potential to become an active process in which the students must engage as opposed to passive acquisition of predefined knowledge.

### **Real time travel**

A dynamic dimension of this authenticity is a sincere desire on the part of our students to meet and work with the other participants each year. As part of the joint studies, the Danes travel to Canada for ten days in the early autumn and the Canadians travel to Denmark mid to late winter for the same length of time. While together we not only have classes, introduce assignments and work in groups, we also are billeted at each other's houses (teachers are included in this as well) and get to know what it is like to live with a Canadian or Danish family and experience the culture of each nation.

To start this travel portion of the program, we establish at the beginning of our joint project communications between our Canadian and Danish groups several weeks before they even meet. The Danish students send off their bios so that as soon as the Canadians begin their new school year Danish bios are waiting for them, and they immediately begin to work on their own and send them back to the Danes. Thus a highly prolific communication goes on in the period before the students actually see each other in person (their photos are attached to all messages as soon as they become users and get their passwords). These connections heighten their anticipation and they very soon find out that this and that person shares their own interests.

We find this travel a very necessary part of the joint experience and it operates in such

a seamless way. Whether the students are online, or in person, the talk and shared laughter is spontaneous and ongoing. And not surprisingly, these relationships last from year to year. We are still receiving emails that students are visiting each other from every class. Siblings too join the class in subsequent years and report that their brother or sister has just returned from Canada or Denmark or that they have just met in Great Britain, France or Africa. According to graduates, these long lasting liaisons were formed as a result of all the people they met in the class because everyone has known everyone else. Has anyone married as a result of the connection? Not that we know.

### **Our experiences as teachers**

Much of what we are doing makes a real difference to the students and as teachers it is highly satisfactory to see that what we are trying to achieve in the classroom with IT actually works. Still, we are also aware that we must continue to work on our site to make adjustments and enhancements, we must consider our curriculum choices, and we must adapt our pedagogy. The changing nature of IT environments demands that we keep up to date. What we did yesterday is not necessarily effective enough for today. Not only is IT being constantly enhanced, the skill levels of our students are advancing at the same or a faster rate. When we first started, students knew very little about IT. These days it is rare for the student not to have home access and easy facility with the medium.

Our joint curriculum project has not only continued to develop to fit the time and the new opportunities given us. Two more of the Danish teachers at NGG, Sanne Bork and Elisabeth Rechnagel along with their English classes have been involved in the

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project for several years; plus this year we have added another grade that is working on a short joint project in both schools and an additional teacher. The program keeps expanding in many ways. Any limitations are the ones that we set, these are not imposed.

Indeed, the administrators, Michael De Angelis at Applewood Heights and Jan Thrane at NGG, have been most supportive of this ongoing IT connection that stresses global education, technological advancement and international relations. At each stage of our evolution, these school leaders have actively engaged in the discussion of our goals, provided budget support and have participated in the program and the travel so much so that both have been several times to each country. Their ongoing long term support has facilitated and encouraged the

connection between schools. They are open to new ideas, when they provide growth opportunities for students.

### How does the future beckon?

Our way has always been to look towards what will make the future better for our students while including what worked in our curriculum from the past. Now we are investigating ways to include video technology on our site to enhance experience, databases to sort information, and connections with other grades within our schools and with other schools to expand our horizons.

We all believe that in this multi-tasking world, where the skill sets of our students are constantly changing and they are juggling a diverse portfolio, IT provides the environment and the stimulus to make our students better communicators.

