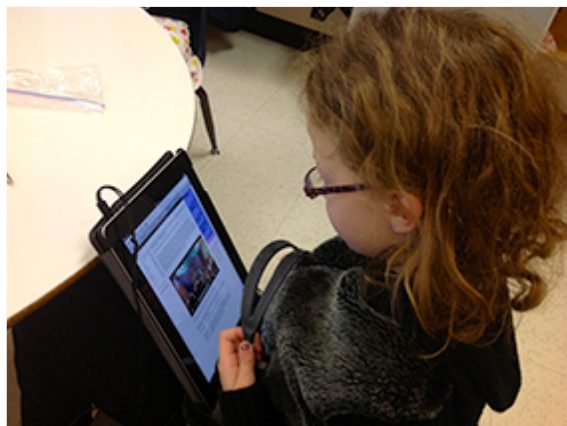


# Connected from the Start:

Global Learning in  
the Primary Grades



**Kathy Cassidy**

*Foreword by Dean Shareski*

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Published in the United States of America

First Publication, April 2013

ISBN 978-0-9854089-1-6

Powerful Learning Press

4068 Bridgehampton Lane

Virginia Beach, Virginia 23455

[www.plpnetwork.com/about-plpress/](http://www.plpnetwork.com/about-plpress/)

## How To Use This Book

As I was on the journey described in this book, I was documenting it through images in [my Flickr account](#), posts on my [former](#) or [present classroom blog](#), our [classroom Twitter account](#), my [professional blog](#), my [personal Twitter account](#), my [YouTube account](#) and in other online spaces. While this eBook is complete in itself, your understanding of what is mentioned can be much richer if you use the hyperlinks in the text. Many of the hyperlinks will take you to an online artifact that has been part of my own or my class's growth. You will also find 10 videos (the images with Play buttons) throughout the book. Click on an image to activate the video hyperlink. – *Kathy Cassidy*

For your convenience throughout this book you will see the following icons:



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# Dedication

To my husband, who has always supported and encouraged me, even when I have bitten off more than I can chew. Doug, you have tried to save me from myself more times than I can count. Thank you for finding ways to help me make it work even when I don't listen to your warnings.

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# About the Author



Kathy Cassidy is a Grade One teacher for Prairie South Schools in Moose Jaw, SK, Canada, and an Apple Distinguished Educator. Since 2005, she has been integrating various technologies into her teaching practice to help “connect” her primary-grades students so they can become global learners. In addition to her widely followed [classroom blog](#), she writes about her professional work at [Primary Preoccupation](#) and for the [Voices from the Learning Revolution](#) group blog.

As time allows, Kathy does professional development presentations and workshops on technology integration and early literacy. She has received the Canadian Innovative Teacher Award from Microsoft; the Canadian Regional Award for Reading and Technology from the International Reading Association; the Kay L. Bitter Award from the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE); and, in 2012, a Best in Class Award from Best Buy Canada that allowed her to purchase 1-to-1 iPads for her first grade classroom.



# Acknowledgments

No one learns in a vacuum and I am no exception. I have been touched and influenced in some way by every student, parent and colleague that I have had contact with through my career—even, and perhaps especially, by those who have challenged the way that I connect my classroom and made me think through my pedagogy once again. I am grateful for each of those relationships and for what they have contributed to my life.

I have been fortunate to have [\*Dean Shareski\*](#) as a mentor. It was he who first inspired me to connect my students and then helped to make my ever-expanding vision a reality. I watched him closely and asked hundreds of questions, and he was kind enough to never make me feel like I was pestering him or a thorn in his side. I am further indebted to him for writing the foreword to this book.

I am grateful to the teachers of [\*Westmount School\*](#) for setting a daily example for me of the way in which caring educators should be connected to their students. Through our constantly changing leadership and increasingly stressful work load they have continued to care about their students and to do their best to meet ALL of their students' needs, not just their educational ones.

[\*Prairie South School Division\*](#), my employer, has allowed me the freedom to pursue my passion for connecting, and a succession of principals has supported what I am doing in my classroom even when they haven't been exactly sure why we were sitting in a semi-circle, talking to our computer. That said, the points of view presented in this book are my own and do not necessarily reflect the school division's views or current policies.



I am grateful to those who have provided the tools to allow my class to connect, especially the creators of classroom blogging tools. [Classblogmeister](#) (thank you, [David Warlick](#)) and now [Edublogs](#) have allowed my students to become participants in a global classroom.

[Jody Hayes](#) (New Zealand), [Maria Knee](#) (USA) and [Amanda Marrinan](#) (Australia) are all early years educators who were also early adopters of a connected classroom. The passion and dedication of these ladies inspired me and taught me so many things.

My online learning network of educators continues to inspire me with their passion for their students and for making education better. I cannot overestimate the impact that these people, whom I may never meet, continue to have on my own learning.

This book would not have been possible without the vision of Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach, CEO of [Powerful Learning Practice](#), who sees and pulls out of people what they did not know they had to give, or without my editor [John Norton](#), who has patiently and kindly helped me in my journey and who dared to think that I could write a book.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, I am grateful to all of my past and present students for touching my life and for teaching me the value of connections with others, both inside and outside of our classroom.



# Foreword

by Dean Shareski



In my personal journey with technology, there are two very distinct “aha” moments. Number one came in 1997 when I created my first webpage using something called html. Inputting some weird symbols on a screen, sending them up to something called a web server, using something called FTP, and then knowing that the page could be seen by anyone anywhere with an internet connection and something called a web browser was transformational. Computing was about possibilities.

The second aha occurred in 2003, when I discovered something called a blog. I should say that in my role for nine years as a district technology consultant, aha moments were not of much value unless I could help teachers somehow see the same value as I did. While the complexity of computing often assumed it would be best suited for more mature students, I could see the potential for early learners as well.

So did Kathy Cassidy. It wasn’t until I offered a workshop on blogging that we really began to teach each other. To be honest, I don’t remember much about my intent other than to show teachers this cool new idea around web publishing. I do remember Kathy asking if I thought her young students could do this. As a former primary teacher and one always interested in a slightly crazy idea, I said, “Absolutely.”

I really had no idea. But I did know that if it was possible, Kathy would make it work. And she did. And that was only the beginning. While I often considered myself the proprietor of the “crazy idea factory,” it was Kathy who thoughtfully implemented many of our crazy ideas and made them into something powerful for students.

When I talk to teachers about the powerful potential of computing and technology in the classroom, it’s rare I do so without mentioning Kathy. When teachers question whether

**Grit, curiosity and  
passion**



these things can be implemented, and I tell them that Kathy teaches 6 and 7 year olds, they're usually astounded. Kathy has become a shining example of what one teacher with some grit, curiosity and passion can do. As Kathy will often tell you, she doesn't feel like she's very tech savvy. That's where grit comes in. She asks a lot of questions. I wish I had all the email queries and messages she's sent me over the years. I could not always answer them, but she was never afraid to ask. That's curiosity.

Kathy has also been gracious, albeit at times hesitant, in sharing her best ideas. That's because she's passionate about teaching and learning. This book includes many of the things she's discovered, presented at the level of detail other teachers like to see.

You're reading this book because you want to learn more. You're like Kathy, curious and motivated to help children experience learning and life to the fullest. Kathy has paved the way for countless numbers of primary teachers to feel empowered to take their students to places many could never have imagined. Chances are, you're about to join their company.

And here's the very best part of this book. After you finish reading it, unlike many authors, you'll not be finished learning with Kathy. As I mentioned, she's very gracious and willing to help. Yes, she's a full time classroom teacher but it doesn't stop her from reaching out and sharing with whomever reaches out to her. She continues to blog, tweet and post questions and ideas that engage her and others in her learning network.

You get to participate with her as well. So after you read the book or maybe pass it along to a colleague, [\*send her a message\*](#), keep asking questions and continue to learn together.

*Dean Shareski is the Community Manager for [\*Discovery Education Canada\*](#) and is currently on leave from [\*Prairie South School Division\*](#) in Moose Jaw, SK, Canada. Dean specializes in the use of technology in the classroom and holds a Masters of Education in Communications and Technology through the University of Saskatchewan. He is also a sessional lecturer for the University of Regina.*



# Introduction: *If I Can Do It, So Can You*

There are few people who are less likely candidates to be writing a book about using technology than I am. Nothing about using software and hardware has been intuitive to me. I have never been interested in playing online games. I never did learn how to program a VCR, and I have often called my husband or one of my children to ask for their help with the baffling array of remotes we have in our home. When my own children learned their mother was trying to use technology in her classroom, they laughed at the idea.

But when five computers were plunked in my grade one classroom with the instructions to “use them,” it started me on a journey. These computers had a word processing program and Internet access, but nothing else. Since the computers did not allow for the installation of software, and there seemed to be little use for word processing with students who are still learning their alphabet sounds, I set out to make the Internet accessible to and useful for my students.

You’ll hear more about our ensuing adventures throughout this book. My first step was to teach myself how to create a [webpage](#) so that I could link my students to the online games that supported the skills they were learning. As the years went by, that [webpage expanded](#). Eventually, with a lot of support, I learned how to create some content of my own to support my students. The result was a continually growing website.

Some days it felt like I was getting somewhere with this technology stuff, but most days it didn’t. It seemed there were more things that didn’t work than did. Still, I kept plodding on because I thought this Internet thing might be here to stay, and I saw how much it intrigued my students.

Then one day I learned that my students and I could use the Internet to connect with others and to collaborate online in ways I had not imagined. We began to share what was happening in our classroom with others around the globe and to learn from people and classrooms far away. This shift has





had a profound effect on both how I teach and on how my students are able to learn. We have brought the world into our little learning space.



In this book I want to show you how the transformation to a connected classroom has happened for a primary school teacher in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, Canada. Most of all, I want to convince other educators that if I can do it, so can you. As I wrote the book, I tried to keep the needs and interests of teachers in grades K-3 foremost in my mind. But other teachers will find much that might be helpful, both in the tools discussions and the chapter on digital portfolios.

## What I'll Share in This Book

- The story of my journey to connect my classroom with the world.
- How my students and I use tools such as Skype, Twitter, video and blogs to connect with classrooms in other cities and countries.
- Examples of powerful connections between primary classrooms.
- Why and how my six year olds use digital portfolios.
- Practical advice to help you begin to connect your own classroom.



# 1 Why Connect?

I'll never forget my students' first online connection with another classroom. It was a time before [Twitter](#), [Pinterest](#) and [Facebook](#) were household words. [YouTube](#), Google and [Skype](#) were still new, interesting ideas and most of the other social networking tools that have now made connecting with others part of all our lives were yet to be invented. I had started a [classroom blog](#) but hadn't seen anyone else who was blogging with primary-aged students. Finally, in late 2005, I found [Jody Hayes](#), a Year One (what educators in Canada and the United States would call kindergarten) teacher in New Zealand and her class of Voyagers. We connected our students using our classroom blogs.

As part of our whole group reading, my class would regularly read what her class had posted on their blog. Together, we would compose comments for their classroom blog and for the blogs of her individual students. The Voyagers did the same on our blogs.



Photo by Jody Hayes



One day, when we checked their blog, we found a picture with a group of children pinching their noses as they gazed at the body of a dead shark. Perhaps plugging your nose at an odious smell is universal because my students immediately understood what was happening in the picture.

There was excitement at the idea of a real shark in a schoolyard. There was a clear understanding that the odor of this particular shark was not something pleasant. Then, after a pause, my students looked at me and asked, “Where did they get the shark?” To my land-locked prairie children, many of whom had never been outside of our small city, finding a shark was an entirely unlikely experience (albeit one they all wanted to have). That image led us to discover that our blogging buddies’ school was near the ocean.



I watched as the students processed this foreign sounding information. Their eyes showed the same sense of wonder when we discovered the International Date Line and the difference in times between our two classrooms. They were fond of saying “The kids in New Zealand are sleeping now, right?” at random times throughout our day.

When we were learning about volcanoes (another unlikely landmark on the prairies) and posted our new knowledge on



our blogs, Jody's class told us they had a volcano near their school. When my students realized that this volcano sometimes actually spewed ash, they were beside themselves with excitement.

Jody and I discovered that the last half hour of our school day in Moose Jaw corresponded with the first half hour of school (on the following day) in their city of Palmerston North. Because of this, we had a small but precious window of time to connect our classrooms "live" using Skype. My students' reactions to the first Skype call were a surprise to me. When they heard the Kiwi-accented voices of Jody and her students, they looked at me blankly. "Are they speaking French?" they asked. For the first while, I had to "translate" what the New Zealand students said so that my students would understand.

We chatted with the Voyagers about what they liked to do after school, what their classroom looked like, and books each group enjoyed. After the end of the call, my students had a lot more questions for me. They wanted to know why all of the Voyagers were wearing the same clothes. Did all kids in New Zealand wear those clothes? Why is it tomorrow there? How can it be summer there when it is winter here?

## The Power of Connection

Our connection with the five-year-old children in New Zealand was a unique and authentic learning experience for all the students. Together we discovered so many things we had in common and so many interesting differences. Both classes were learning to read and to write. We all liked to play with our friends after school, but the sports we played were not the same as those they enjoyed. Some of our foods were the same, but what on earth was Marmite? My students wondered what their New Zealand friends did at Christmas, at Halloween and at every other occasion.

Having the opportunity to converse with and peek into the lives of children with whom they had so much in common, but who lived in such a different setting, was an experience I had never before been able to give my students. It was a chance to make my classroom more culturally diverse than it could ever be without this global window. My students' concept of the world was richer and more authentic than it had ever been. I was hooked. The learning that took place thanks to this powerful



connection was an experience that I wanted my students to have every school year.

Today, I don't just hope that my current students will have experiences similar to the one I've just described. I look for opportunities to bring the world into my classroom through online connections. As new social media tools become available, it is getting easier all the time to seek out teachers and groups of students in distant lands and learn together. More and more, teachers are discovering the value of a connected classroom. You, too, can bring the world into your classroom.

## Why This Global Learning Matters

Some teachers I talk to say they do not have time to connect with other classrooms because they are too busy covering their curriculum. In fact, connecting with others is not an addition to our curriculum. It is not something we do after we have finished our reading and math for the day. It is the way we do our curriculum. From practicing counting by fives or comparing similarities and differences via Skype, to writing for a world-wide audience, to making and sharing videos of social studies concepts on our blogs, we connect and invite the world to learn with us and to help us learn.

Although learning from others is a key reason why I continue to connect my classroom online, there are many other reasons as well.

### 1. Our Students Will Be Part Of a Hyper-Connected World

The world seems to shrink a bit more every day. This has been the pattern for many decades. As this trend continues, the world that my students will be part of in their adult lives will be incredibly connected. Twenty-five years ago, I spent some time living in Thailand. When my husband and I left Canada to move there, we knew that our only connection with our family and friends would be letters and an occasional (and expensive) telephone call. If we were to make that move now, there would be a multitude of ways we could connect with home, both synchronously and asynchronously, anytime we chose.

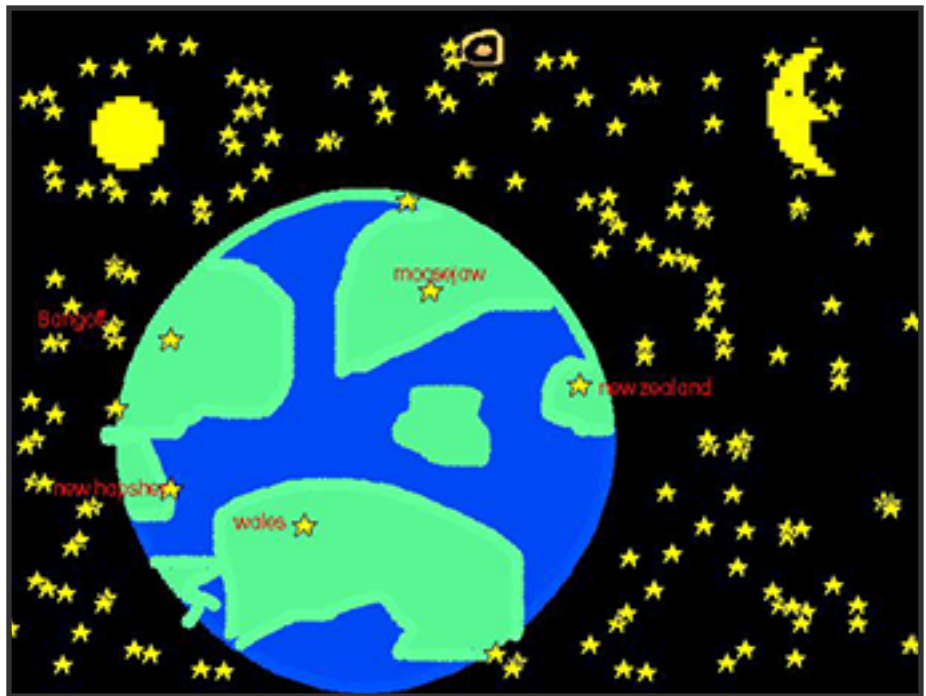
Although having a computer or device with an internet connection in my students' homes becomes a little more common every year, not every child in my class has this access. Sometimes these children and their parents are able to access





the Internet from a relative's home or from the public library. What is clear is that we are continually moving toward the point at which every family will be connected.

These connections are not restricted to our private lives. Business is also becoming more globally connected. It is possible and perhaps even probable that our students will spend much of their working lives in some kind of virtual conversation with colleagues from around the world. If that is even a possibility, we owe it to them to begin to prepare them for that option. We want to get them ready for the world they will be part of, not the world that we lived in as children, or even the world we live in now.



## 2. A Global Perspective Increases Empathy

The enthusiasm of my students at the discovery of the volcano near the Voyagers' school was tempered by the fact that they knew volcanoes could be extremely dangerous. Because of our online connection and conversations, they felt about the students in New Zealand the same way as they did about the students in the classroom next door. They were concerned for their safety, and it was important to them to find out if their friends were in danger in the event of a volcanic eruption. It is easy to brush off dangers or catastrophic events when they do not personally affect your life. Knowing others who may be affected by that danger takes something abstract and makes





it personal. You begin to care. My students were relieved to discover that the volcano in New Zealand did not spew lava—only ash—and that the ash had never endangered any of the students at the school in Palmerston North.

From children in places far from where we live, my students have learned that not everyone has the same alphabet, that people speak other languages, that some areas do not have snow in the winter, that children everywhere learn to read and write, that school rules can be different, and that, yes, there are trees in Wisconsin. Without our online connections, these global understandings might not have been gained for many years, if ever.

Kids can often learn better from a classmate or another child than they can from their teacher. If you are a teacher, I'm sure you've seen this in your own classroom. I certainly have.

### 3. Kids Often Learn Best From Other Kids

I remember one of the moments that this was hammered home to me. One of the objectives in my curriculum at the time was learning the difference between needs and wants. I planned and taught a couple of what I thought were fabulous lessons about what each of these concepts was and the difference between the two. Then, I asked the students to make a Common Craft type of video to show what they had learned.

If you are not familiar with [Common Craft](#), they have a series of simple but brilliant videos explaining concepts such as Twitter, social media, [RSS](#) and wikis. The camera points at a table and films the narrator's hands. As he talks, the narrator pulls pieces of paper with simple drawings or words in and out of the camera's view.

My students' task was to create a similar video to show what they had learned about the difference between [needs and wants](#). When the videos were completed, it was obvious that despite my brilliant teaching, three of the students still did not understand the difference between these two words. Instead of re-teaching, I took those three students aside and showed them videos created by students who obviously had a clear grasp of the concepts.





It was like the lights went on. After having seen what their peers had created, those three students all clearly understood the differences, and they were able to go on to create a [new video](#) showing this learning. You can probably think of similar things that have happened in your own classroom.

Now, imagine those “aha” moments happening through a connection with a child in another place your students have never been and will probably never have a chance to visit. I could have simply told my students that there are volcanoes in New Zealand, or read a book about children who wear uniforms to school, or shown a video about children who live near the ocean. Would my teaching have provoked the same learning? I don’t think so. As we talked with our Kiwi friends below the equator, the children could ask questions and get answers. They could observe the learning of the other children in response to the answers we gave. My students could be part of the lives of people who lived on the other side of the world. This vivid personal connection both inspired their learning and made it more meaningful to them.

#### 4. We Learn about Online Etiquette and Safety

Some people worry that young children should not be online because they cannot be safe. Instead, I worry that young children who are isolated from social technologies will not learn



HOW to be safe online. In our increasingly connected world, it is important for even five and six year olds to begin to learn what is appropriate when using technology to connect.

While I agree we need to take steps to protect children, I think it is equally important that we begin to teach them how to handle themselves in virtual settings. Having them create digital content and interact in a safe manner is essential learning for a child growing up in the Internet age. Unfortunately, we are not having many conversations about this at the level where decisions are made about education policy and practice.

Almost everyone knows the story of an adult who, because of something that was posted online, was denied a chance at a job, or lost their employment, or was censured in some way. I know of a young man who was denied a chance to compete for a coveted job in tourism because the sponsoring organization found a video of him online using profanity at a professional football game. Incidents such as this are happening more and more often.

The issue of online bullying is also gaining worldwide media attention. Many children and adults do not realize that once something is online, it stays online. You may be able to delete it from your website or Facebook page, but you must assume there will always be a record of what you posted somewhere in cyberspace. As significant as this issue has become in our lives, it will become even more important in the future as our world continues to become more connected.

Even 10 years ago, we could never have predicted how important the Internet and the connections it allows would become. A positive digital footprint is on its way to becoming an essential part of all our lives. Even five and six year olds can begin to understand this concept.

My curriculum asks me to teach the students how to recognize potential safety risks in play areas. To my students, the Internet is a play area. Online safety is just one of the forms of safety that they need to learn to be healthy and secure as they grow.





When my own children were too young to cross the street on their own, I took their hand and crossed with them. As they grew, I let go of their hand and walked beside them. When they were ready, I watched as they crossed the street on their own. Finally, they were ready to do it entirely without me.

When my primary-aged students begin to interact online, I do not set them loose to explore on their own. I figuratively take their hand and we do things together. After much modeling, I let the students do it while I watch. When those habits are firmly established, I watch from afar while they do it without me. I do this to ensure that they interact online in a safe and appropriate way.

## 5. I Place a High Value on Serendipity

Time and again, our classroom interactions with students far away have resulted in unforeseen learning. When we began connecting with the classroom in New Zealand, I had no idea that they lived near the ocean or that they had a volcano nearby. Those unexpected realities led to serendipitous learning.

Over the years, we have “accidentally” discovered that some schools have no girls, that some people go swimming on Christmas Day and that some schools have no school buses. We’ve learned what it looks like to have a tornado drill in a



classroom. Year after year, I have let the students “discover” for themselves that when we chat with students in Australia or New Zealand, it is already the next day there. The learning is much stickier when they suddenly perceive that the kids down under are having summer when we are having winter and that not everyone wears snow clothes for four months of the year.

One day my class received [a package in the mail from New Zealand](#). It contained some wonderful treasures such as kina and paua shells and ash from a “real” volcano. This led to more wonderful questions about why [the pumice was so light](#) and how the paua shell got to be blue inside, and why anyone would think to eat the spiky kina shellfish! More serendipity.

These kinds of connections bring something to the classroom that nothing else can. Connecting globally has changed my classroom and my teaching practice in such a profound way that I feel almost claustrophobic thinking about old-style instruction. Maybe you already enjoy this same sense of freedom to connect. If not, let me introduce you to the tools I use to lower our classroom walls and welcome the world in.



## 2 Connecting with Skype

Many people assume that young children cannot participate in online learning because they lack the academic skills to do so. If students can't yet write, they reason, they can't yet be effective online communicators. This is untrue. Before each of us learned to read and write, we all learned to communicate through sounds, gestures and language. These skills are the only ones necessary to become connected learners. You just have to choose the right tool!

Skype is an online service that allows anyone to make free video-enabled phone calls to any other Skype user in the world. Did you read that? In the world. That means a lot of possible connections. As long as the other classroom or teacher has a Skype account and an Internet-enabled device of some kind (computer, tablet or smartphone) you can open an audio, video and text channel from your classroom to theirs.

In my classroom, we use Skype regularly to connect and “chat.” We’ve had conversations about [ocean animals with a kindergarten class in New Hampshire](#); we’ve [asked questions of a geologist in Oregon](#); we have done [reader’s theatre with a first grade class in Alabama](#), and we’ve even [re-connected](#) with a [former student who moved to another city](#). We have compared [stacks of Oreo cookies](#) with classrooms across the United States and gazed in wonder at ocean views. The ways you can use Skype are really only limited by your imagination.

### Caleb’s Story

One year the chicken pox was making its rounds in our school just as our group of writing mentors (teacher education students from the University of Regina) were about to visit our classroom and meet us face to face for the first time. Missing this important occasion would have been a big disappointment for a student who could not be there.

When I got to school on the morning of the pre-service teachers’ visit, I got a message that my student Caleb was





now covered in spots and would miss the much-anticipated event. I phoned his mom and suggested we bring him into the classroom using Skype. Caleb's mom, who had never used Skype before, was game to try. She downloaded the software from the Skype website, set up her account, and we soon made the online connection.

Caleb was contagious but eager to join in. His designated mentors were able to use Skype on my computer in the classroom to see and talk with him. These big and little buddies were able to get to know each other better, to draw pictures of each other, and to talk about writing while the other students who were at school did the same with their mentors. Later, one of his mentors held my computer in her lap so Caleb could watch her professor, Patrick Lewis, tell the story of a very resourceful tailor.

Once Caleb's family discovered how easy Skype was to use and how they could connect (for free) with other Skype users, they began to use it regularly. Since Caleb's father was at that time working in a city far away, they began to use it to have regular chats with him. All of the children in the family could see as well as talk to their dad when they connected in this way. And talk about school, of course!

Can you see why I love Skype?



## How to Get Going with Skype

To use Skype for free in your classroom, you need to have an Internet-enabled computer or other device, a microphone and a video camera. You can actually make Skype calls without using the video feed, but having a visual image of the person or

persons you are talking to increases learning tremendously and is so much more engaging for little learners.

## App Talk

*When used with wireless, the Skype mobile app gives you access via your device to anyone else who has a Skype account. It's like a free video-enabled phone service! The app allows for text messages as well. Best of all, the app is free.*

Do you have your computer ready? If so, you can go to the [Skype](#) homepage, click on “Join” and download the software for free to your computer or other device. You should be prompted through each step. It will ask you to give a Skype name, your real name and where you live. Some people are tempted to make up fake names, to only put a first name, or to leave their location blank. It is, of course, your choice to do this, but do consider the fact that the more real information you give on Skype, the easier it will be for people to find you. And in this case, you want people to find you!



For several years, we made all of our Skype calls using my teacher computer. I moved the screen to the edge of my desk and used a small webcam that I had been given as a gift. I turned the computer monitor so that the students could see the



screen by sitting on the floor near my desk. The webcam that I used was suspended from a cord, which I draped over the top of the screen. It was prone to turning at odd times and needed to be readjusted frequently, but it did what it needed to do—send our images over the Internet to our distant friends. There have been slow but steady upgrades of this arrangement since those beginnings. Now, we are able to use Skype on a laptop that is *hooked up* to our interactive whiteboard so that all of the students can see more easily.

## You Have a Skype Account. What Now?

Once you have access to Skype, make a call!

Ideally, your first call on Skype should be to someone that you already know who is a Skype user. This takes the pressure off of you. My own first Skype calls were not fun experiences. They were adult professional sharing opportunities and were fraught with tension as I tried to figure out how it all worked while being involved in a serious conversation.

Don't follow my example. Skype (it's a verb too) with a friend and laugh as you learn. Better yet, try it (without kids) for the first time with another first time user. Loads of fun and you can help each other to learn. When the teacher in the classroom next door to me began using Skype, we tried it from our classrooms, shouting questions and answers back and forth as we figured out how to get his microphone to work.

## Finding People to Skype with Your Students

Skype has a search feature to help you find people you know. If you search by name, it will give you a list of all the people with Skype accounts who have that name. Do you see why I suggested adding other information? I once searched for my own name to see if I could be found and discovered forty other people named Kathy Cassidy with a Skype account. To help people find this particular Kathy Cassidy, I have included my location and a picture of myself in my Skype information.

Maybe you have a friend who is a teacher in another school who is also interested in connecting his/her classroom. That is a great place to start. Your students can begin to connect and learn together right away. Or you might have a non-teacher friend with the knack for engaging kids who has something interesting to share with your students. If not, here are a couple of options for finding classrooms:



*Skype in the Classroom*– Skype has a free site for educators. Joining allows you to gain access to other teachers from every grade level who are also registered on the site (you'll find several short *introductory* videos at the homepage). Many *teacher users* have contributed Skype-based projects that can be searched by a keyword, but if you are just starting out, you may simply want to go to the teacher section and search by first, fourth, kindergarten etc. This will bring up all of the teachers who teach a grade similar to your own. Choose someone who looks interesting to you and send him or her a message explaining what you would like to do. If you don't get a reply, try someone else. You have nothing to lose!

*Twitter*– If you are already on Twitter, you will know that it is not hard to find like-minded teachers there who would be willing to skype with your classroom. Many teachers who use Twitter have also discovered it's an excellent tool for on-the-spot, continuous professional development. If you have an account, try following a hashtag associated with your grade level such as *#kinderchat*, *#1stchat*, *#2ndchat*, etc. (Actually, you can check out what people are saying on Twitter without joining, but you have to sign up to actually be part of the conversation.) The teachers on Twitter who use these hashtags are another easy place to find some connected educators who would love to skype with you and your class. If you're not on Twitter, why not try it? (See Chapter 6 to learn more about Twitter.)

Later in this book, I'll share some other ways to make classroom connections.

## Skype in Action

You've found someone who is willing to skype with you. Excellent.

There are three ways you can communicate via Skype. You can talk with audio only (much like a telephone), or turn on the video and speak "face-to-face" with someone, or you can type into the Skype chat feature (similar to instant messaging or texting).

The text chat can be used synchronously or asynchronously. If the person you want to contact is not online, he or she will see your text comment the next time he or she opens Skype. I have had some quick Skype text chats and some that lasted for over





a hour. The great thing about the texting feature is that you can work at your computer or nearby and pick up the threads of the conversation (or several conversations with different people) as you are available. Each time someone sends a text message over the chat line, there's an accompanying sound.

You can also use the text chat during a face-to-face call. It can be handy for pasting in content or sending links to someone while you are talking to them. You can even send documents and other files. This doesn't happen a lot if you are "skyping" with your class, but as your network of professional Skype contacts expands, it will likely come in handy. Try out the different styles of communication I've highlighted with your first Skype partner—that close and forgiving friend.



## A Word About Time

I have heard more than one person say that connecting to other classrooms with Skype is easy—the tough part is dealing with the time differences. If you chat with another class in your immediate vicinity, this will not be an issue, but if you talk to someone in another province, state or country, you need to be aware of the time zone they live in. If you make a plan to call someone at 10:00, and haven't considered the fact that it is only 8:00 in their time zone, they may not be at school, or you may be interrupting something.



More than once I have been in calls in which one or more participants mixed up the time. It can be uncomfortable to say the least. You can easily check out the time in a particular city by using a Google search. Most, but not all, places in North America shift their clocks by an hour in the spring (forward) and the fall (back). This can lead to all sorts of mix-ups if you let it. I once arranged a Skype call just after the “fall back” date. My Canadian province does not change time, and it hadn’t occurred to me to mention this when we made our time arrangements. Happily, our conversation was still able to happen, but it could have made things difficult and disappointing.

When I am planning a Skype call, I often use an online meeting planner like timeanddate.com, which takes into account all the time zone shifts and aberrations. You can enter the date and the locations of both parties to see when the best meeting times might be. And this free service is especially useful for calls with more than two participants.

If you are lucky enough to be able to make a connection with someone from another continent, and you begin planning a Skype call between your classrooms, you might have to be creative. Several times my students have had to come back to school in the evening with their parents to allow us to talk to the Gems, who live in Brisbane, Australia. When it was six o’clock at night for us, it was ten o’clock the next morning for them!

## How to Get the Most from Your First Skype Calls

When you are ready to have your first Skype call with your class, here are some things that might help the experience to be successful.

- Have a clear goal in mind. Will you be introducing all the children? Asking them if they have any patterns (one of our topics of study) in their classroom? Finding out what their weather is like? Practicing counting together? Extra questions that come up during your call are great, but start with a plan and then you can be flexible if need be.
- Talk to your students ahead of time about behavior. They will probably get excited and forget, but I still try anyway. I let all of the students have a chance to see what they look like on the camera before our first call each year so that they can concentrate on the purpose for the call and not on





the chance to see themselves on camera.

- If possible, hook your computer up to a projector so that all the children can easily see what is on the monitor, even if they can't see the computer itself.
- Give as many of the children as would like to a chance to talk, even briefly.
- Keep the call short. It is better to have another one later and to end the call on a high note.
- Talk about the call after it is finished. What did we learn? Did we use our best manners? What goals should we set for our next Skype conversation? Are there other things you would like to know about that class?

## Skype-ti-quette

I think one other Skype etiquette item is worth noting. There are no real rules about this, but I now try to always send a chat message over Skype before I actually call someone, even if the call has been arranged well in advance, just to be sure that nothing has come up and they are actually available and prepared to start.

On one occasion, a child had just been sick in my classroom and we were still dealing with the aftermath when Skype began ringing (signaling a live call). That conversation was a bit harried. Because of this and other incidences, I now make it my personal practice to send a message confirming that the other class is ready to talk before I actually click the call button. You can model this for your students—it's one of those "21st century skills."

I recommend observing this same courtesy when you're skyping adult colleagues. I have unintentionally interrupted someone who was on another Skype call when I neglected to do this—not exactly the way to make friends! One day I was at an autism workshop using my laptop to take notes. Suddenly, the unmistakable sound of a Skype call began coming through my computer's speaker. The sound filled the venue, and I was more than a little embarrassed as I quickly turned off my speaker and scrambled to send a chat message to the person who had tried to call me.





## One Time Calls vs. Sustained Relationships

Some classroom teachers are able to develop a long-term relationship with another classroom and skype with these friends on a regular basis through the school year. The students ask questions and share what they have been learning about. They might even set up a regular game or contest between their classrooms. Some school years, my class has had relationships like this. The advantage is that you don't spend all of the conversation time introducing yourselves but can focus together on an interest you have in common, such as cultural similarities and differences, or books you have been reading, or interesting things the class has been doing. Classroom relationships, like any type of relationship, take time to develop.

I know of two teachers whose classes had regular Friday spelling bees or math fact practice with each other even though their classrooms were 2500 kilometers (1600 miles) apart. Primary students could read their writing aloud to their distant friends, or share climate data for another class to graph, or challenge each other to find the answer to a deep question before their next meeting. The possibilities are endless.

As I am writing this, my class is involved in a [math problem challenge](#) with a class that lives about an hour away from us. Each month, the students make up an open-ended problem for the students in the other classroom to solve. During an initial



Skype call, the classes challenge each other with a problem. Later, we have a chat to talk about our answers.

On other occasions, we've had more one-time or short-term chats, talking with children in many places, getting a flavor for each group as we do so. When we were studying patterns, my children wondered if there were patterns in places other than in our classroom. We looked for them at home first, and then we had the opportunity to talk on Skype with several other early-years classes who showed us that they did indeed have patterns in their classroom. My students were enthusiastic when they realized that there were patterns wherever we checked!

Both long-term relationships and one time Skype calls have merits. I think there is a place for both in a primary classroom—it depends upon your goals for the call.



## Connecting with Experts

Classroom connections can be wondrous, but sometimes you want to connect with an adult who has special knowledge to share. One year, when we were learning about jobs that people have at work and in their homes, several people were willing to use Skype to talk to my students about the jobs that they had at home and in their workplace.



Another time, when my students had questions about their hearts, lungs and brains, I tried to find a nurse or doctor who would be willing to come to our classroom to answer the questions we had face to face. I was unsuccessful. Fortunately, I have a sister who is a nurse. She lives in another city, but she agreed to talk to my students via Skype. The students took turns going up to the computer to ask questions like why do you have to wear a helmet and why does your heart beep? Although I could have told them the answers to most of their questions (but not all), it was much more meaningful and memorable for them to have contact with someone who had some medical background, and Skype gave them that opportunity.

On another occasion, we were studying rocks. After exploring many samples, my students had lots of questions about rocks, how they were made and why they looked the way they did. My own understanding of this process is rudimentary to say the least, but I knew there must be someone with more expertise who could talk to my students. I put out a question on Twitter to see if anyone knew of a rock expert who would be willing to answer the questions of some six-year-olds. I didn't receive a direct answer, but a few days later, I was chatting on Skype with my friend [Maria Knee](#) who is a kindergarten teacher in New Hampshire. She was able to connect me with [Dr. Trish Gregg](#), a geologist in Oregon, who readily gave her time to patiently answer the students' questions. In fact, she was a [regular visitor](#) in my classroom for several years after that.

## Being the Expert

My students have also had the experience of "being the expert" in Skype conversations. When they are conversing with someone from far away about their classroom or their home or their school, they are certainly the experts. Besides answering questions about our school or class, they have exchanged information about dinosaurs, taught counting skills, talked about a favorite picture book, and shared how to make a pattern. Students love to have the chance to be the "teacher" and those opportunities are easy to create when you have this powerful connection tool on hand.

My students have also been the experts about Skype itself. Several times they have been asked to skype into professional development sessions to share with groups of teachers about





why using Skype in the classroom is important. It has been a joy to watch even normally quiet students bursting with pride that they are the experts and have something to teach grown-ups.



## Skype in the Curriculum

Obviously, anytime we bring in an expert via Skype, we are tackling questions the students have about a particular curricular outcome. Conversations we have with other classes are also aimed toward at least one area of our curriculum. Sometimes this involves math, such as patterning, counting or comparing numbers. Other times the focus is on literature or reading, such as when someone shares a favorite book with us or we read aloud to someone who is willing to listen.

When my grade twos were learning about communities, we contacted a class a couple of hours drive away, whose community has only 800 people. My students were interested in many of the differences between our locations, but they were most startled to learn that this community had no Burger King OR McDonalds. No matter what age-group you teach, or whether your students are studying cities, provinces or states, their understanding of the world can be enriched through contact with people who live in other locations.



Each Skype call also gives opportunities for students to practice their speaking and listening skills. Even the shyest student wants a turn to ask a question when we use Skype. Using the computer to communicate compels my children to speak loudly enough to be heard and clearly enough to be understood. It gives them practice in formulating questions (as opposed to the ever-popular comments) and in listening for answers. These are all important curriculum outcomes in the early grades.

While reflecting after a Skype conversation with a [\*class in Memphis, Tennessee\*](#), my students made this list of similarities and differences between our class and theirs. The purpose of the call was to establish whether the students in the other class had jobs to do at home, but just look at all the other learning that took place!

Some things are the same:

1. We all have jobs at home.
2. We have the same school rules.
3. We have the same rules at home.
4. We all like to play video games.

Some things are different:

1. They have no school buses.
2. They have no girls at their school.
3. They have to wear certain clothes.
4. They all stay at school for lunch.
5. They all get rides to school from their parents.

## Other Ideas for Using Skype

As more and more teachers make use of Skype, more teaching and learning ideas are emerging. Recently, some kindergarten teachers have begun using Skype to try something they call [\*Skype Play\*](#). These teachers simply connect with another classroom and have the computer on while the students engage in free play. The students show each other what they are doing and ask about what is happening in the other classroom as it interests them. This is a tremendous use of Skype to help the students to [\*learn as they play\*](#).

What about using Skype to do movement breaks of some kind with another class—a kind of Skype-er-cise? What about setting aside time for students to practice their reading fluency





by reading to one another? What about two classes teaching each other about letter sounds or math facts? Any learning that you do in your classroom is more fun and has more of an impact when you have a buddy class to learn from and with as well. While they are learning the curriculum outcomes, the students are also learning important cross-curricular lessons about communication and other cultures.

Although the time difference makes it difficult for our classes to connect, teacher [Amanda Marrinan](#) in Brisbane made good use of the connection she and I have with each other to bring new vocabulary to her year two (what I would call grade two) students. I have skyped from home in the evening to show her class the wonders of such foreign ideas as snow, basements, furnaces and snow blowers. Many teachers are willing to do this even when classroom time does not overlap. We love to teach!

### Group Video Calls on Skype

*As this book was going to press, Skype announced a new program that allows educators to make free group video calls. I quickly tried it out! You can [read about my first group video call](#) and my “lessons learned” before you make your own.*

### The Last Words About Skype

I want the last words about Skype to come from my students themselves. On one occasion, when we were asked to contribute to a professional development session for some teachers in another country, I first talked to my students to make a list of why they thought it was a good idea to use Skype. They easily came up with four powerful reasons.

1. You can find out things you didn't know.
2. You can learn about other places.
3. You can meet people you didn't know.
4. Other people can learn from you.

Out of the mouths of babes.



# 3 Why We Use Blogs to Connect

In early 2005 I stuck my toe into the river of blogging, a half dozen years after I first got serious about using computers to help my students learn. I quickly became immersed!

It all began in the 1999 with a pilot project that gave every classroom in my school five computers. My heart jumped at this news. If you teach primary, you know that five of anything can become a center. Could I have a computer center in my classroom? Could computers help me to teach literacy? My excitement was tempered when I learned more about the limited capacity of these particular devices. The computers (called Sunrays) had a word processing program and Internet access, but did not allow for the installation of software. That meant none of the packaged learning games that were then available could be uploaded to the computer and used by my young students. (With the rise of apps and the plethora of options now available in devices and applications, this seems ridiculous—but at the time it was a real issue.)

Since the children were beginning keyboarders, typing in URLs or making extensive use of word processing was impractical. My first graders' emerging reading skills meant that using a search engine was also out of the question. What on earth was I going to do with those five computers?

I checked around and found that there were beginning to be some good, free, educational game sites online (we hadn't heard about the "cloud" yet). That was all very well, but how could I get the students to those websites without running from computer to computer, typing URLs for them? Even if the URL was something manageable (like [starfall.com](http://starfall.com)), primary students type painfully slow, are prone to typing mistakes, and are wont to close windows "on a accident" and then the whole process has to be repeated.



My 2003 solution? I began to develop a classroom webpage as a hub to get my students safely and quickly to those games and other appropriate sites that supported our grade one curriculum. As [the webpage](#) became more extensive, it also included links to pages that I built myself, such as a page to practice [sight words](#), and a page with [leveled, interactive books](#) that the students and I had created together.

## Two Early Sites Worth a Look

*If you are a teacher working with beginning readers, two of the sites I built early in my exploration of using technology with young students are still worth a closer look.*

*My [sight words](#) page is a way for students to practice sight words independently. Twenty sets of sight word “cards” are organized and digitally embedded into individual pages. If a student cannot read the word, rolling a mouse over the word produces a child’s voice reading it aloud. Clicking on an arrow in the corner changes the card. PDF printouts of each set of word cards (suitable for printing for home use) are also available.*

*[Browser Books](#) is a site with 50-plus illustrated, leveled books created with my students over the course of a year. The “books” are all interactive in that a student has individually recorded each word. A click on a word gives you a child’s voice reading that word. The books are sorted by both level and subject.*

*Both of these sites were mammoth projects that I would not recommend to anyone, but do take advantage of what has already been done here.*

### Our First Fledgling Efforts

One of the links on our webpage at that point was called “[Our Day](#).” During the last few minutes of each day, I would log one of my students into the somewhat cumbersome webpage creation tool (Dreamweaver) that I used at the time, and he or she would write a few sentences about what had happened in our classroom on that particular day. The students themselves



chose what they would write about, based on what they felt were the highlights. Sometimes a student would write a few sentences about an interesting activity or project. Other times, less-inspired students would simply look at our posted agenda and then type out in brilliant six-year-old prose, “We had math, We had spelling,” and sign their name.

Whatever the content, it was a way for us to communicate with parents about what was happening in our classroom and give students a chance to be the “star” when it was their turn to be the writer. The parents loved to look on the webpage and see what had happened that day at school, particularly if their child was the featured writer. Unfortunately, this writing disappeared the next day when it was the turn of another student to update that page.



After a few years, I was becoming frustrated that all of our “computer” activities involved lower level thinking skills. I was using the five computers as a center in the classroom, so the children had regular access to them. The students were enjoying the games linked from our webpage, and happily used them to polish up their alphabet, reading and spelling skills. They read the online books, practiced their sight words, and worked on their math skills across all the strands of our curriculum. They were learning.



## Looking for a Creation Tool

Nevertheless, it didn't feel like we were using these pricy classroom tools in the best way. My students were using the computers to remember, to understand and to apply the things they were learning, but I wanted them to get more out of these clever machines. I wanted the children to use higher level thinking skills. I wanted to hear their ideas. I wanted them to create.

Since writing on a computer was obviously possible, I thought about the creation opportunities that writing could provide. I had a vague idea in my head about a template of some kind that my students could use to compose their own text during our center time. I mused about ways to put their writing online and link it to my webpage, but I had no real idea how to pursue this. I asked for advice from people who were far more computer savvy, but they just shook their heads.

Then, during a professional development day in my school division, I happened to attend a session given by our technology consultant called "Fifty Cool Things on the Internet." It was only an hour-long session, so each of the "cool things" got less than a two-minute description. But one item with a strange name really caught my attention: blog. I thought about blogs for a few days and then emailed the presenter to ask, "do you think this could work with grade one?" I was fortunate. At that time [Dean Shareski](#), who sees potential where no one else does, was my technology consultant. His quick response was "yes!" and the next week he was at my school helping me to get started.

With the discovery of blogging, my quest was complete. Because a blog is set up to have the most current article at the top, with all previous articles archived in order below, we now had a place to write about current happenings in the classroom without losing what had been written on previous days. Parents could look back to see multiple entries and follow what we'd been doing over time. By creating student blogs that were linked from mine, my students also had their own space to write, to show their academic growth, and to just plain create! I was able to achieve each of my objectives with one powerful new tool.



From the day I created our classroom blog—and began to realize its potential to communicate what was happening in our classroom to the world—I have never looked back. In the intervening years, blogging has become such an important and integral part of our school day that I can no longer fathom teaching without it.



## Growing a Blog

For the first six months, my blog was pretty boring. I kept a faithful account of the goings on in our classroom, but the posts all contained only text. I had no idea how to include a picture or embed video. (Blogging tools now generally make it easy to add media, but that was not the case when I first started.)

When I learned how to insert photos into my posts (again thanks to Dean), I felt like I had won the lottery. My students are like primary kids everywhere—adorable. Using a digital camera, I was able to capture their faces and expressions as they went about their daily classroom tasks. Adding these photos to my blog made it infinitely more interesting to visit and read. And being able to add images made an enormous difference in my ability to communicate what was happening at school to my children's parents. (In Chapter 4, I'll talk about safe blogging practices.)





It occurred to me that since I could add photos to my blog, I could do that for the students' blogs as well. I began to occasionally ask the students to *illustrate their writing* using a drawing program we had on the machines in our computer lab. I would upload those images to a *photo-sharing site* and then add them to their blog. Later, I realized I could do the same thing with *video*.

While I was busy learning how to make our blog a more interesting place to visit, our readership was changing as well. Other teachers and classrooms began blogging, and they became part of our audience (as we became part of theirs), along with the children's parents. Later, other people beyond the classroom began to notice our blog as well, giving us an even wider audience.

Over the years since our blogging journey began, my student's blogs have continued to develop -- from a series of writing samples into a more comprehensive online portfolio (Chapter 5) that reflects their learning in all subject areas. Our blogging excursion has taken us to places we never imagined we might go when we took those first tentative steps.

That's been my journey. Now, what about you?

## Why Would You Want a Blog?

Often when I mention the possibility of blogging to a teacher, I can see their eyes glaze over. They can't see a benefit commensurate with the time it takes to launch and maintain a classroom blogging enterprise. Before your eyes begin to glaze, let me share my perspective. After blogging with my students for many years, here is why I think blogging is an important thing to consider doing with your class.

**Audience.** For any writer or creator, it is all about the audience. As an adult, unless you regularly write in a diary or journal, most of your writing is likely done for an audience. The emails you send, the family to-do list, the student evaluation or the growth plan you submit to your principal—all of these items are written with the intention that they will be read by someone. While I'm writing report cards, I am very aware of the audience that report will have. Knowing something will be read gives me a different perspective as a writer. I choose my words more carefully and think about the reader's information needs.



Children, too, want an audience. An audience spurs them to do their best thinking and writing. Why would students even want to write on a piece of paper just for their teacher to see when they could write on their blog for the world to see? A blog allows student writing to be read by people beyond the walls of the classroom. In an important sense, that makes it “authentic,” no matter what the age of your students is.

**Feedback.** Because a blog allows comments, my students’ thoughts, ideas and learning can be not only read, but responded to. Students relish the feedback a comment gives, whether it is from a classmate, from a parent, or from someone they have never met. Through their comments, the audience becomes part of the students’ learning process.

**Creating a Community.** Having a blog creates a community within and around our classroom. The articles, podcasts, images and video we post are like stones dropped into this community pond. Each of those posts has a series of ever-larger ripples around it.

The first ripple is our classroom community. The students eagerly look at and read each other’s posts, sometimes leaving a comment and sometimes talking to their friends about it. They love being able to see what their classmates have created.



The next ripple in our pond of community is the circle of parents. Parents can watch their child's blog and observe their child's progress first-hand. They do not have to wait until our student-led conferences to learn what and how their child has been learning. The growth is obvious for them to see.

A larger ripple is the circle of the child's extended family, friends and our local community. They too can watch, encourage and interact. Often this circle includes students who have been in my classroom in the past and return to our blog to comment and encourage the younger students. They remember the power a comment had for them.

The largest circle is—well—the entire world. Potentially, anyone anywhere could be part of our classroom community and be part of my students' learning. Over the years, we have received comments and had online interactions with people from every continent. That creates a very large sense of community!

**Digital Footprint.** Our world is becoming increasingly connected and tied to what is online. Even at a young age, it is important to begin to understand what it means to have a *digital footprint*—including what sorts of things are suitable to post online, what things should be kept private, and ways to interact with others appropriately in an online space. In the years since I first began blogging with my six-year-olds, the world has become increasingly digital. It is reasonable to assume that throughout their lives the tools will change, but the connectedness people have will only increase and the digital footprints will proliferate.

Children need to realize it is important to present yourself well online and to understand some of the ways this can be done. In a classroom environment, a teacher is there to help them learn appropriate online etiquette and how to think about our online reputation.

**Their Culture.** We teach students today who have no concept of a world without the Internet. Technology is ubiquitous and often transparent. They want to, expect to and do use technology at home. For me to deny them access to technology and what it allows them to do would be like asking



someone from an earlier generation to learn without a pen or pencil. It just wouldn't make sense.

**Student Conferences.** When we have student-led conferences in my classroom, my students use what is posted on their blog as the starting point of our conversation with their parents.



Their parents are frequently already familiar with what we have posted, and the students are able to focus on what they feel they are doing well, what they want to get better at, and on setting goals for the next term. Usually, my students choose three things from their blog to talk about at our conference. With my help, they share the curriculum outcome they have been working on, what they have done well, and what if anything they need to do to continue to work towards that target.

**Pride of Ownership.** I will never forget the delight in the eyes of one of my students when, during the school year, his family gained access to a working computer in their home for the first time. "Mrs. Cassidy, I showed my blog to my parents last night. I showed them all my stuff! They liked it!" he shouted excitedly as he ran in the classroom door.



## Blogging as Connecting

His pride and sense of self-worth was palpable. The writing and artifacts on his blog were his and his alone, and because they were online, he was able to show them to his parents in a space that was comfortable for everyone. I know that although I don't always hear about it, that moment is repeated over and over in the homes of all of my students, as they show their parents what they are accomplishing at school.

All of these reasons to blog are important. Taken together, I think they're sufficient to justify the time you will likely need to invest. But for me, the most important reason to invest time and energy into our blogs is that they allow us to connect with people across the country and around the world. When I configure our blogs, I create a place to put links to other classrooms with whom we frequently learn. One click (from school or home) and my students can see what their virtual friends are learning at any given time.

Connecting doesn't begin and end with other classrooms, though. Some of our best connections have been serendipitous—conversations and relationships that began when someone happened to find our blog and used the commenting feature to communicate with us.

One winter, flu season meant that half of my class was missing from school. The students who were at school made videos to show what they had been learning about the “silent e” and shared them on their blogs to help the kids who were sick at home. I posted one of the videos on my blog, and our class received these three comments.

■ Beautiful works by the children and an excellent blog! Best Wishes to all of you :) ~ surekha  
Comment Posted on January 25, 2012 at 01:00 AM by [surekha](#)

■ Hey Kathy! I am first grade teacher from India.I really liked your blog.  
Comment Posted on January 22, 2012 at 05:24 AM by [Ranjita](#)

■ I just love your drawings to the difference in what silent e can do. I think my K kids could make videos about words. Thanks for the idea.  
Comment Posted on January 20, 2012 at 10:55 PM by [Mrs. Robek](#)



The comment at the top linked us to an [\*art with children blog\*](#) that we had never seen before, but that had wonderful ideas for us to emulate. The second comment sent us to a map to find out where India was and to wonder what it was like to live there. The bottom comment showed my students that what they created and posted had value, not just for them, but for others as well. They were awestruck.

Connecting with blogging can be so powerful!





# 4 How to Blog with Primary Students

*How do you do that?* I get this question a lot. When people see my [students' blogs](#), the [online artifacts](#) and [videos](#) they are able to produce, and the intentional digital footprints the children are beginning to create, they wonder about at least two things.

Their first question involves issues of safety and how I go about getting parent permission to post images and schoolwork of their children online. The second question—"how do you find the time?"—grows out of the perception that I am spending many hours working on and "teaching" blogging in addition to everything else we must do during a busy school day.

Let's address the safety issue first.

## Keeping Students Safe

From the moment their children are born, the parents of our students have dedicated their lives to protecting them. Even before the child was born, they began to love and shelter that little being. They have nurtured the child through the preschool years and then trustingly put the child into the school's care. All the while this was happening, the media has bombarded them with messages about how unsafe the Internet is for children. When we broach the subject of posting their child's work online, is it any wonder they have questions? I would be concerned if they didn't.

Because I know the value it can have, blogging is not optional for the six year olds in my classroom. It is what we do. My students' blogs are their online learning portfolios. From the [first week](#) of school to the last, my students write (even before their writing is "readable") and produce digital artifacts that showcase what they have been learning. That portfolio is available any time of the day or night for parents to view or comment on. It is also available for grandma and grandpa in a far away city or for their older sibling who is away at university. The fact that people who have never met my students read their blogs and sometimes leave comments is just a bonus.



I am fortunate that my school division, [Prairie South](#), recognizes that posting online is valuable. On the first day of school, a permission form explaining possible online and offline uses of student images and work is sent home for parents to sign.

It begins with this paragraph:

*In Prairie South schools, we often create blogs, podcasts, videos, wikis and other social media, but we do not create them for one person. We create them to share with the class, the school and the school community and, perhaps, the world, because we understand that a global audience drives achievement.*

You can download the complete permission form at the [Prairie South website](#). (Click on Students and then Student Media/Privacy Form.)



## Letting Parents See What Is Possible

In the second week of school, I always hold a parent information night. On that night, along with talking about how to help their child learn to read, and suggesting alternatives to sending birthday party invitations to school (it leads to tears from those not invited), I show our classroom blog to the parents, with the pictures and videos of students from last year.



I also share a student blog from last year and demonstrate how the student's learning was documented through [writing](#), [images](#) and [video](#). We pay attention to how that student's writing ability improved through the year and listen to podcasts of the child's reading fluency. I show them how many visitors our blog has had and a sample of comments the students received. I usually show them our [Clustr Map](#), with dots from all over the world, indicating where people live that have visited our classroom virtually. We talk about the value of parents and family posting on their student's blog, and I ask them not to include their last names with their comments so that we can keep secret their child's identity.

Most important of all, I talk about how I safeguard their child as we learn online. I have two keystone policies to ensure each student is protected.

**1. I post images of students, and I post the first names of students, but I never match the two.** I know of many teachers who do identify their students in classroom blogs, but that is not my personal policy. So while you will see pictures and videos on my blog of all the students at one time or another through the school year, you will never see a personal image of a child on their own blog. You will see self-portraits and videos that may show their hands demonstrating a concept, but you will never see their face. You may know that I have a student named Toni in my classroom because you see his name in my class list, but you will never know which of the adorable youngsters in the pictures on my blog is named Toni.

**2. Nothing gets posted unless I see it and approve it first.** No student articles. No comments. Nothing. I control what goes onto the blogs. My blogging tool is configured so that all comments and all articles by students are submitted to me for approval before being posted. Of course, I simply would not post anything that was inappropriate.

When a student submits an article that I think is inappropriate, I have a chat with the student to discuss why I thought it was inappropriate and what could be done to make it better. With that student's permission, I use the issue as a teachable moment and talk about what has



happened with the class so we can all learn from it.

There have only been a couple of issues with inappropriateness. On one occasion, a little girl who had had an argument with her friend wrote in a post that she hated her. I was able to talk to her about the fact that she wouldn't always feel like that about her friend, but that what she wrote would always stay online. Did she really want it posted? Of course she agreed that she did not. The other incident involved a boy who had posted about getting a gun. When questioned, he said that the words were from a song that his mom had on a CD at home and agreed to post something else instead.

If a comment were ever submitted that I considered inappropriate, I would simply delete it from the review queue. Unless I approve something, it never appears in a public online place. Interestingly, in all the years I have had students blogging, the only comments I have had to delete have been occasional spam, comments from parents (who forget the no-last-names rule that can identify their child) and a few comments from the students themselves.

The first students who blogged in my grade one classroom are now in grade nine. In all that time, I have never had a parent who, after seeing what we do on our blogs, refused to have their child participate. The first year I posted pictures of the children on my blog, I had one parent request that her child's picture not be included. By Christmas, after seeing the way I used the children's images, she had changed her mind.

If a parent ever DID have concerns, I would offer these two options:

1. Not posting any pictures that featured that child.
2. Having that child blog under an alias.

### How Can I Show Parents a Blog I Don't Yet Have?

I realize that many teachers would like to dive into this, but do not yet have a blog to show parents. In that case, I have encouraged teachers to show the parents a blog they would like to emulate. There are lots of great [primary blogs](#) online now, and this is a case in which a picture really is worth a thousand words.



## How Do You Find the Time to Blog?

Parents want to know that we are not putting their child at risk. Their questions come from their overwhelming desire to ensure their child's safety. I too am concerned for the students' safety. At the same time, I want them to have a chance to have an authentic audience and to make connections with people they would otherwise not be able to connect with. I think we can do both.

The issue of available time is always an interesting one. Every one of us has the same amount of time, but we all choose to spend it differently. The choices we make establish our priorities.

Over my years as a first grade teacher, I have changed my routine many times. Sometimes the change has been small and sometimes it has been large enough to affect the entire setup of our day. I have never changed what we did in our classroom because I was unhappy with what we were already doing. I changed because I found something that I thought was even better. Blogging is one of the things that is better than what I did before.

In the past, all of our writing was done in notebooks or on paper. We still write on paper, but we also write on our blogs using computers, netbooks, iPads or whatever digital tool we have access to. I made the change to digital for all the reasons I mention in this book—including gaining an audience, the chance for feedback, and the ability to create a community that stretches beyond the walls of our classroom.

In the past, our whole-group reading was usually poems, songs or shared big books. I have a whole box full of poems on flip chart paper that we would chant together, using a pointer to track the words. We still do that occasionally, but most of that text has little real meaning for the students. Now our shared reading is the blog posts and comments written by friends, family and others who are part of our global classroom community. Those comments and blog posts are full of authentic, meaningful text. In the case of comments, we are reading a piece of writing composed specifically for one of my students. This text is much more significant to the students than my carefully printed and laminated charts ever were.



In the past, the posters, drawings and other projects that the students made were taken home and put on the refrigerator, on the wall or in a box for family members to treasure. That still happens, but a *digital picture of that project* can also be a part of that child's permanent digital portfolio. At other times, instead of a paper product, we make a video or some other digital artifact for the students' blogs to showcase what they have learned. My students also do some of their writing on their blogs instead of on paper.

None of the changes I have made in my classroom has added time to the school day. I simply changed the way we did something because I felt there was a better way to do it. I took time from one activity and invested it in another that would achieve the same curriculum goal. Blogging has simply changed how we do something, not what we want to accomplish.

## Time Outside of the Classroom

Having a classroom blog does require teacher time outside of school hours. I write and post blog entries on my blog. I read and approve articles that the students have written. But the digital things I do outside of classroom time are not in addition to a paper and pencil task; they are a replacement for something that I once did but no longer do.

In the past, I had a bi-weekly classroom newsletter that went home in a duo-tang folder. Each letter had a cute border theme that varied with the seasons. Behind my page in the duo-tang went a letter from the student (with the same cute, themed border). I also included a blank page for the parents to write a letter back to their child. This letter from the parents was read by me or by the child to the entire class. My students would beam as their letter was read aloud.

This bi-weekly newsletter has been replaced by our classroom blog. Now parents do not have to wait two weeks to have an update from me about what is happening at school. Instead, they have regular news, augmented by images and videos. Through our blogging, parents also have access every day to the new content posted by their children and other students. This content does not just showcase little Johnny's advances in writing—his blog entries chronicle (and document) his progress and success in every subject area.





And the letter from home? By commenting on their child's work, parents are sending their child a digital letter that is attached directly to his or her online artifact. Just as with the paper letters, we read these comments aloud. We use our classroom projector so everyone can see, and we all help with the reading. Does every parent comment? No. But not every parent found the time to respond with a letter in their child's duo-tang either.

In effect, our classroom blog serves as a dynamic, easily updated newsletter that is much more "newsworthy" than the paper edition that was a staple of my classroom for years. Does it take time? Of course. But truthfully, there has never been enough time to do all that I want to do, whether before or after I began using the blog. I am not spending more time; I am simply spending my time differently.



## Getting You Started: Five Kinds of Blogs

When I began blogging with my class, I could not find any other primary classroom blogs. This has definitely changed. Every day I now see new examples of primary teachers who are sharing student work and classroom events with the world. As a teacher who is always looking for new ways to help her students to learn, I love this! It's like being able to have a window into countless classrooms all over the globe right on my computer screen. I see wonderful things, and I know that reading these blogs makes me a better teacher. ([Here's a growing list](#) of primary school blogs from around the world—you can add yours when/if you have one!)



Watching these primary blogs emerge over the years, I have seen teachers use them in many different ways. There is no one right way to blog. I like the way I have our blog site set up, but what works for me is not what works for everyone else. Here are descriptions of five different approaches to blogging that I have seen work for the primary grades.

**1. The Teacher Blogs and the Students Comment** – In this approach, *the teacher* poses a short question or posts a link to a game, and the students all respond by commenting. This allows students who are emerging readers and writers to participate in the blogging experience in a limited way. Parents can see the comments that their child has posted, and gain a sense of what the class has been learning about. The students have access at home to links that the teacher has posted in either the articles on the blog or in the sidebar.

**2. The Teacher Blogs about Classroom Happenings** – Some blogs are totally owned by the teacher. He or she blogs about classroom happenings and parents can visit to find out about the latest events at school. The students are not involved in this except as observers or very occasional commenters. They may be seen in pictures. These blogs can also contain reminders about what to bring to school the next day, tell about upcoming events and include tips for the parents about how to help their child to practice concepts being taught at school.

**3. The Teacher and Students Share a Blog** - There are also blogs on which the students and teacher share the space. The teacher may post about a classroom event, followed by posts (sometimes several in one day) made by students either commenting on what the teacher has posted, or sharing some text or artifact of their own learning.

**4. Teacher and Students All Have Blogs from a Central Hub** – This type of blog has been made popular by the blogging host *Kidblog* (see below). The *main page* of this blog is simply a list of the most recent entries by any of the bloggers, whether teacher or student. The teacher's name (if she has a blog) is listed along with the students' names in the sidebar.



## 5. The Teacher's Blog Serves as a Central Hub for

**Student Blogs** – This is the type of blog *that I have*. The teacher posts about classroom happenings on her blog, and all of the students have their own blogs that are linked directly from the teacher's blog, which serves as the central hub.

Are you ready to jump (or at least tiptoe?) into blogging with your class, but don't know where to start? It can feel overwhelming, with the many technology choices available today. Here's some of what I have learned that can help relieve the stress.

### Choosing a Blogging Tool

There are a lot of things to consider before you choose a blogging tool, and what is important to me may or may not be important to you. Perhaps you want readily accessible technical support. Maybe ease of use is your first priority. Possibly the most important thing to you is the finished product—how will your blog look? Perhaps what happens to the students' blogs at the end of the school year is one of your priorities. All of these are important considerations. It's essential to think about what you want in a blogging tool before you sign up for one.

My suggestion is that before you choose a platform, you look at some examples of primary classroom blogs to see what appeals to you and what you might like to do differently. You can also compare the various features of blogging hosting platforms (See the sidebar for links to a list of primary blogs and a comparison chart.) You might want to visit the homepage of teacher-friendly blogging services such as [Kidblog](#), [Edublogs](#), [Weebly](#) and [Blogger](#) to see what they offer. Another tip: Go to a search engine and type in classroom blog or (your grade) blog. Follow some links that come up. On each of the blogs you find, you will probably discover links to other blogs you may want to explore.

### Choosing a Blogging Host

*Many primary teachers who are using blogs with their class and/or their students have added a link to their blog on this [growing list of primary blogs](#). I love the diversity all of these blogs show. The list gives teachers who have not yet begun blogging a chance to see which tool most appeals to them,*



*some of the possibilities blogging offers, and an idea of possible classrooms to connect with.*

*Some people like to comparison shop when they are choosing a blogging platform. [This spreadsheet](#) compares some features of blogging platforms for those who like to see it organized in this way.*

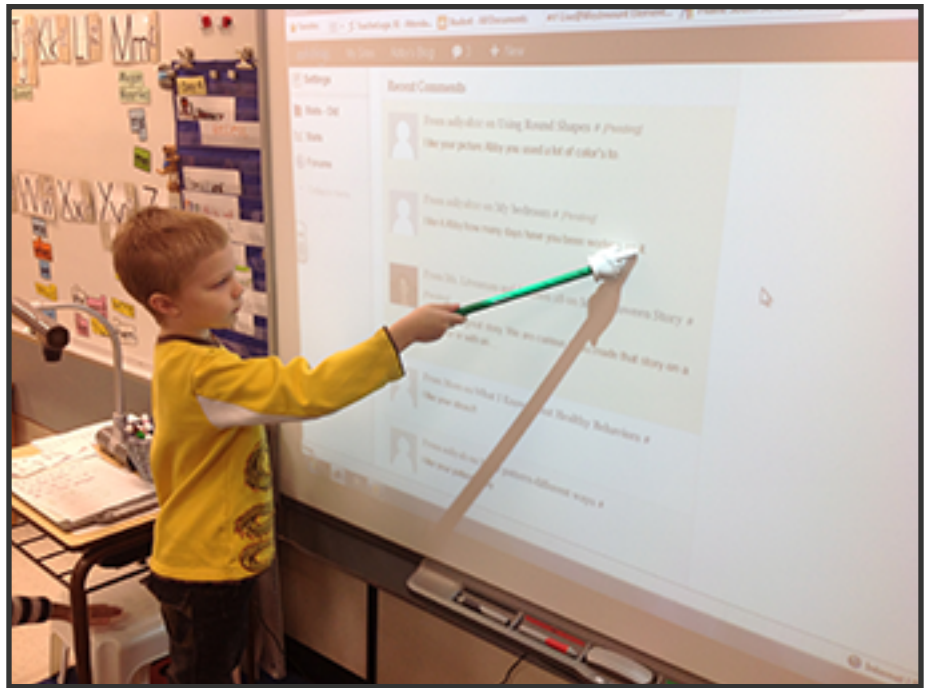
One of the risks of listing and recommending any blogging platform is that things change so quickly. By the time you read these words, there may be new, outstanding options that I have never heard of. Having said that, I'll go out on a limb and say that at the time of this writing (early 2013), my two personal favorite blogging options for young children are [Edublogs](#) and [Kidblog](#). There are other tools that many people prefer, but for beginners, the ease of use and good support of Kidblog gets my vote. And it's free. EduBlogs also has a free service, but I personally use the Edublogs Pro account (there is a yearly fee, currently \$39) because I like the extra flexibility (e.g., we can embed videos). Edublogs gives you lots of design options, storage and great technical support. I also like its capacity to have students' blogs listed automatically on my sidebar.

When you decide which tool is right for you, just go to the home page of any of the blogging tools I mentioned above, create an account, write a post and get started!

## How I Begin Blogging with Students

I like to begin my school year by showing my students what has happened the year before in my classroom. We look at some of the images and videos I posted, and I also show them examples of student blogs. They see that the students wrote, drew pictures and inserted other digital artifacts. They are intrigued that this is on my computer and that yes, it is also on their computer at home if they have one, as well as on their grandmother's computer and their mom's computer at work! As you will imagine, they are enthralled with the idea that they could have an Internet space of their own and are keen to begin. As soon as I have the permission notes back from their parents, I set up a blog for each student and we begin with our first blog entry. I'll talk more about this process in Chapter 5, when I describe how student blogs can become digital portfolios.





## Comments Are Precious Gold

Receiving comments is a thrill for any blogger, no matter their age. I can think of many special moments in my classroom when my students were all seated on the floor in front of our interactive whiteboard and together we read aloud a comment that inspired not just the child that received it, but all of us. We were elated when Aaron received a comment from his grandparents who lived in a distant city and when a comment came from Eric's brother who was away at university. Dozens of times we have been excited to get comments from aunts and uncles who took the time to respond to something one of my students had written. And when we get comments from children or classrooms in another country, there is often a collective gasp of delight.

As a teacher, I am constantly on the lookout for ways to make learning deep, authentic and meaningful for my students. Comments are an excellent way to bring meaningful text into the classroom for reading experiences. When a parent comments on their child's blog and talks about the improvements they are seeing in their child's writing, that is meaningful text. When students from far away comment on a project we've written about on our classroom blog, that is meaningful text. When one of the children in my room comments "you r my bstfrnd" on their classmate's blog, that is





meaningful text (even if that same comment was made to three other students on the same day!).

Several times, a thoughtful teacher (and not someone I know) has taken the time to comment on the blogs of every one of my students. What a powerful motivation this has been for them. I am grateful to every parent, sibling, former student, relative and stranger who has given some of their time to comment on one of my six year old's blogs. Comments are the lifeblood of blogs, and getting them is important to students and to the learning process that blogs represent. To a child, they are a sign of validation and an indication that he has an audience for what he writes.

Knowing this, it is important that you, as the teacher, ensure that your students all receive comments at some point. Young children are obsessed with the idea of what is "fair" (oh, how primary teachers know this!) and to not receive comments when some of their classmates are receiving them is definitely not fair in their estimation. It can never be completely equitable, but I do my best to make sure that all students do receive comments.

### How to Ensure Your Students Get Comments

The first and most obvious person to give comments is the teacher. I know just which one of my students needs a kind word of encouragement. I also know the best time to give it.

The notion of "fair" that I mentioned above is a sticking point. Students keep track, and if you give a comment to some of the children, but not to others, they will know it and some of them will be sure to let you know. (Unfortunately, their memories are often imperfect, so we can't rely on them to give us a complete and accurate picture of everyone's comment status.) For this age group, it is better for the teacher to never comment than for the teacher to only leave a comment for a few of the children.

There are two ways for the teacher to ensure fairness in giving comments. The first is to keep an exact record of who has been given comments and when. Over the course of a year, make sure that everyone has an equal number of comments so that when a child (you know there will be at least one) accuses you of not giving him or her the same number of comments as the others, you can show him the list and give the dates of your



comments. The second way is to give everyone a comment at the same time. This is less desirable because not all children “need” a comment at the same time, and it lessens the impact if everyone gets one at once.

I have used both of these methods. I'll admit I find it difficult to keep track of which students I have left comments for. I have a lot of checklists in my classroom—for permission slips, skills acquisition, projects completion. Sometimes having another checklist is one more than I can deal with. When that happens, I turn to the “all comment at once” strategy. If my students are receiving regular comments from outside, I may leave the commenting to others. My goal, though, is to always be a teacher who is leaving regular, thoughtful comments at opportune times for each of her students.

Parents and other relatives are another obvious source of comments. At parent information night, I show them how to comment and I do some modeling. Over the years I have noticed a definite shift in parents' comfort level about commenting. While it was a big step for parents in the early days, it now seems to be intuitive to many of them. I think one difference is Facebook. Parents who are regularly using this form of social media are not intimidated by the idea of writing online.

These days I find that one or more of the parents may leave a comment even before we have our parent information night. If this happens, I make a point of mentioning it during our gathering so that commenting is seen as a norm. Most years I receive a flood of comments from parents within a few hours of the meeting's end. Parents love their children above all else; they want them to succeed and want them to know that their mom and dad are behind them in their learning.





## Other Good Sources of Comments

Once the parents know about our blog and about commenting, they pass the information on to older siblings, aunts and uncles, friends and grandparents. These important individuals in your students' lives are fascinated by the chance to peek into the classroom and watch the progress of a child they love. The wonderful thing about the online nature of a blog is that these significant people do not have to live in the same city as you to be an encouragement to a child. Grandparents are often a gold mine—some of our most faithful commenters are grandmas and granddads who live in a distant city. Our blog gives them a chance to be involved in their grandchild's education in a way that would not be possible without that online connection.

Older children who have been in my classroom in previous years are another good source of comments. I have never asked these students to comment, but I always make a point of thanking them in person when they do. (That generally leads to more!) Some leave a note for every one of my students, remembering the example of someone who left them a comment when they were in my class. The interesting thing about this is that the commenters are not always those students for whom writing is seemingly effortless. Just as often these comments come from students who worked extra hard to learn to write. In the busyness of the last days of school, I



have never thought to mention to my departing students the possibility of mentoring my next class in this way, but if I did it might encourage even more students to feel like the “big kids” and take on that role.

The joy of receiving a comment from someone far away whom you have never met cannot be overstated. These comments lead to trips to a classroom map or to Google Earth and to rich, unexpected conversations and learning. How can you get those unexpected comments for your students? Try giving some!

If you have a classroom blog, you probably know of at least one other person who has one. If you don't, use a search engine to find one. Leave a comment on that blog. Look at the side bar of that blog for links to other blogs. Leave a comment on one of those blogs and continue to do this. Sometimes these teachers will return the favor and sometimes they won't. I try to regularly comment on new blogs that I see, but in the hubbub of a primary classroom, this is not always realistic. I give the comments without hoping to receive one in return, knowing the joy they bring. If I receive one back, that's just a bonus.

If you are a Twitter user, another way to attract comments on your students' blogs is to solicit help using the hashtag [#comments4kids](#). This sometimes works and sometimes doesn't, depending on who happens to be checking the Twitter stream at the time. A word to the wise: if you are asking for #comments4kids, you need to be sure to give #comments4kids.

You'll think of other ways to ensure that your class receives comments. Perhaps your principal is willing to help out, or another teacher at your school or a classroom of older students or your reading buddies. Whoever it is and however you achieve it, you need to make sure that somehow each of your students receives some comments each year.

Because receiving comments is so important to students, I make sure that I take the time to teach my students how to write comments as well. With pre-readers and writers, this is a lengthy process! Sometimes we begin by going to the blog of someone who has just left a comment for us. Other times, we begin by visiting the blog of another classroom that is linked

## Teaching Students to Comment



from our classroom blog. Wherever and whenever we begin, we always comment together as a group. (With pre-readers and writers, this is not just good pedagogy, it's a necessity!)

## Commenting by Upper Primary Students

*If your students are in grade two or three (or beyond!), they are ready to put more effort into good comments. Linda Yollis has written a post about this that includes a video of her students explaining [How To Compose a Quality Comment](#). Her article is well worth your time to check out.*

We start by talking about the comments we have received, how they made us feel, and what was good about them. We want to be able to mimic the best of other people's comments to us. Almost always, my students want to start by saying "I like your blog." To help students stay on track and encourage them to think beyond this over-used phrase, we make an anchor chart to help us remember our discussion.



Although this chart is made up by and with my grade one students each year, it does not change a lot from school year to school year. The ingredients of good commenting don't change much, and they can be useful to commenters of just about any age. For my pre- and emerging writers, these four steps seem to work best. Besides teaching them to comment, they reinforce other concepts my students are just learning.

- 1. Say something nice.** What specifically did you like about the post? What made you smile?
- 2. Make a connection.** What did it remind you of? Does it make you think of something you know or have done? Something you saw in a book or on a video? Understanding and making connections is a skill five and six year olds are just beginning to learn.





## Commenting Independently

**3. Ask a question.** What do you wonder? What did the writer not include that you wish had been in the article or blog post? Understanding the difference between something you tell and something you ask is difficult for most six-year-olds. Including a question in the commenting process helps them to learn what a question is and how to think about someone's ideas beyond their own.

**4. Re-read your comment.** This is a vital skill for writers and commenters of any age. As the students realized how often they needed to change something we had written to make it better, we added this step at the end of our chart.

We follow this pattern pretty closely, commenting together for months as they learn the literacy skills necessary to comment on their own. The first independent student comments are often written from home. I make a big deal about these comments, and as with every other comment we receive, we read them aloud together. After one or two students have written comments, the others want to do it as well.

In grade one, we are usually near the end of our year when I will officially ask all of the students to try making a comment on the blog of their choice. At first, I ask them to show me the comment before they click "submit," but when they have shown me that they can do this independently, I let them comment on any of the blogs of their classmates. When they are comfortable doing this, I let them begin to comment on the blogs of other classrooms that are linked from our classroom blog.

I can be sure that if there was ever anything inappropriate (there never has been), the teachers we are linked with would contact me. For students whose spelling skills are still developing, I stay close by and if necessary will write an editor's note in brackets after their comment, in the same way I do with their blog postings.

Do they all follow the pattern that we have practiced together? No. It is a long journey. Typical independent comments usually look like this.



■ hi braeden i enjoy pikshr. i have one to. wen is you brthday.  
Comment Posted on June 13, 2011 at 11:03 AM by Brennan

■ hi braeden were the chicks cute  
Comment Posted on June 6, 2011 at 07:58 PM by hunter

■ hi braeden wet is thata penc thing  
Comment Posted on May 30, 2011 at 10:49 AM by linda

Learning to comment when you are an emerging writer does take a long time, but learning to read and to write anything takes a long time. To me, the result—a student who is beginning to understand how to interact appropriately with others in a social media situation—is worth the long journey. Happily, the students are also improving their literacy skills at the same time.

## Responding to Comments

As is mentioned above in the poster, it's common to see someone ask a question when they comment. As the students are able, I encourage them to answer these questions. This begins with my modeling and us doing it together as a class in the same way we learn to write initial comments. Recently, my class commented on the blog post of a classroom in Surrey, B.C., Canada about [ways to make ten](#). My class was eager to respond to them, but it was their response to our comment that really made the conversation take off.



Mrs. Cassidy's Grade Ones 8 November 2012 13:19


We like your pictures of how to make ten. Atticus has an iPod, too. Jaxson wonder how many ways you know of to make ten?



Ms. L. and Division 18 13 November 2012 12:57


Hello Mrs. Cassidy's class, we know many ways to make ten. Nicky knows that  $5+5$  makes ten. Ayyappan knows that  $9+1$  and  $1+9$  makes ten. Yaksh knows that  $3+7$  and  $7+3$  makes 10. Hannah knows that  $0+10$  and  $10+0$  makes 10. Steven knows that  $6+4$  and  $4+6$  makes ten. Kaleb knows that  $2+8$  and  $8+2$  makes ten. Eldon knows that  $3+5+2$  makes 10. Roc knows that  $6+2+2$  makes ten. Sukhleen knows that  $3+3+4$  makes 10. We can go on. We know many, many ways to make ten. Thank you for your comment. Do you know other ways to make ten?






Mrs. Cassidy's Class 14 November 2012 08:23

Deion knows that 20-10 makes 10. Jaxson knows that 1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1 makes 10. Abby knows that 2+1+1+1+1+1+1+1 makes 10. Megan knows that 4+4+2 makes 10. We have lots of answers for you.




Ms. L and Division 18 15 November 2012 09:29

Wow, you know a lot of ways to make ten too. Tonight we have to go home and tell our families as many different way to make ten as we can. Are you up for our challenge?



Mrs. Cassidy's Class 24 November 2012 16:20

There are ten people in our class who took your challenge for telling their families ways to make ten. They have decided to write the ways down.



Ms. L and Division 18 24 November 2012 16:26

Maryam says that's fantastic and Ayyappan says that's great.

Kids learning with and from other kids—who live 1700 kilometers away!

## It's All About the Audience

Although comments are wonderful, most people who look at a blog do not take the time to leave a comment. These people, too, are part of your students' audience even though they are silent. It is important for students to know this audience exists. There are now many widgets that can be added to a blog site to show the students that people are reading their blog and where those readers are. Popular widgets include [Clustr Map](#), a [Revolver Map](#) or [Who'sAmungUs](#). These tools vary in what they specifically record, but all of them show students that they have been "visited." You will see lots of choices and options for counting and recording location of visitors while you are looking through [blogging examples](#) in your pre-blogging research.

Choose one and add it (it's easy) to show your students that they have a silent audience as well.

## Using Widgets

*Widgets can add to the personality and appeal of your blog, especially for your students. Besides tracking visitors, widgets can tell the time or weather in faraway places or give a recorded spoken message to your readers. [This comprehensive list](#) of widgets also includes instructions for embedding the widgets into your blog. (It is especially useful for Edublogs users.)*



For several years, my students had writing mentors at the University of Regina. These pre-service teachers were taking a class about how to teach writing to young students. Professor Patrick Lewis and I established a partnership between our classes by pairing one of my students with one of his. When their class time overlapped with ours, the students would take turns having brief, individual Skype conferences with their university writing mentor to get to know them and to discuss writing. These chats were held while the rest of the class and I were busy doing other things, but I overheard snatches of conversation such as “Where do you get your ideas for writing?”, “When I read what you wrote about your dog, I wondered what your dog looked like?”, and “Do you remember what kind of a letter you start a sentence with?”.

The university students were also required to comment on each blog entry that my first graders made. These older students made thoughtful comments, encouraging my students and pushing them to do even better. They were a dedicated, personal audience that my students could count on, and I loved being able to have that “captive” audience for my class.

Your class may not be able to be mentored by college students on their way to becoming teachers, but classes of elementary and secondary students can also provide this opportunity. I have frequently had older students involved in some way with my class, and there is no reason these students need to be from the same building. A blog allows a connection no matter where you live.

## The Delights of an Unknown Audience

Although I have always used some kind of application that tracks visitors to my blog, you never really know who is reading it. During Christmas vacation, early in my blogging journey, we received a comment from a boy named Jarvis who had just finished his year one (grade one) in Brisbane, Australia. He had found a link to my blog on one of his teacher’s PD sites. His comment was that he liked my blog and that he also had a blog, and would I please comment on his blog? I happily obliged.

A couple of days later he again commented, asking me to comment again on his blog. I grinned and did so. I decided that a child as plucky as Jarvis must have an extraordinary teacher.



I wondered if his teacher would be interested in some kind of connection between our classes, so I used the email address that had been provided (this is something you can see "behind the scenes" in your blogging platform) and asked him to have his teacher contact me. His father replied to me that Jarvis was in the middle of summer holidays at present (Australia's seasons are opposite to ours because they are in the southern hemisphere), but that he would be sure to mention it to the teacher when school began again at the end of January. As a result, Amanda Marrinan did contact me, and that began an on-going connection between our classes and a life-long friendship between the two of us.

My early blogging days with my class were heady times, as we were contacted by and connected with people who lived in far-away places where we had never been. My classroom hummed with anticipation and unexpected learning. It still does. Since those early days of blogging though, my students' blogs have developed into something more than a blog. They have become digital portfolios online for the world to see. Let's talk about that next.



# 5 Using Blogs as Digital Portfolios

Years ago, I had my students put some of their best writing samples into a folder which I shared with their parents when it was time for our parent/teacher conference. Sometimes these folders would also include math sheets or a painting or drawing the students had done. By looking at all the artifacts collected in the folder, the students' parents could get a sense of the child's learning experiences and his or her growth from conference to conference. We called these folders our "portfolios."

## What is a Digital Portfolio?

A digital portfolio is also a collection of artifacts, but in my classroom we now use a student's personal blog to organize the work samples. Each post that a student adds to his or her blog becomes another "artifact" in what amounts to a virtual folder. The difference? The digital portfolio is richer in content, more comprehensive and much more revealing of the student's progress over time.

When I first began blogging with my students, it did not occur to me that digital portfolios were possible with young children. I saw their blogs as a place for them to write. Period. Then, as they continued to write regularly and I watched their collection of blog posts expand, I saw the potential to showcase the tremendous growth in writing that students experience from the beginning to the end of grade one.

In the early going, each student's blog became something of an online writing portfolio. Parents and others could follow along as their first-stage writing—unedited, random letters—gradually shifted to writing that was "readable." Regular visitors could witness the emergence of a confident writer who began to self-edit and to follow the conventions of writing. Moms, dads, grandmas and grandpas did not have to wait for the semi-annual parent/teacher conference to see how their child's writing was progressing. They could see the weekly growth on their child's blog.





Over the years, my students' blogs have expanded and evolved. Now our blogs also include artifacts from math, science, social studies and reading. What began as a way to write online for a small family audience has now become an opportunity to share learning with an international audience, across all our subjects, using many digital tools.

Each piece of writing or picture or recording that the students post on their blog becomes part of a comprehensive digital portfolio—a permanent record of their learning journey. Parents, relatives, friends and anyone else who is interested in that child can go online at any time, see the progress that child is making, and be part of the child's learning by leaving a comment.



## Preparing Students for a Digital World

The days of walking into a job interview with a snappy portfolio under your arm full of your best work are fast disappearing. Instead, many human resources directors are searching the Internet for the digital footprint of possible employees to get a picture of the way that particular individual presents themselves online. Shrewd job seekers are preparing online spaces using blogs and other tools to show themselves in the best possible light to prospective employers. The portfolio many of us once carried under our arm now needs to be googleable.



This is the world our primary-aged children are growing up in, and will one day be living and working in as adults. As I help my students to post their beginning writing, their videos that demonstrate learning, their pictures and other artifacts, they are developing the first elements of a digital-footprint skill set. They are learning how to show the best of what they do in an online space.

They are also learning that

- People will see what they post.
- People can comment on their posts and be part of the learning.
- Some things are better to post online than others.
- When you put something online, it stays online forever.
- You can learn from others online.
- You can help others to learn online.

## Why Share Portfolios Online?

In earlier chapters, I've offered my rationale for students blogging in public spaces. The argument is much the same for digital portfolios. My goal is to guide my students' online posting throughout the year, producing a representative portfolio of student accomplishment that each child can share with the world.

Part of my language arts curriculum sets out the goals for grade one children in the area of speaking and social communication. One year, my students decided to [make a video](#) to show what they had been learning about this. When we posted this video to our blog, we were startled to get replies from so many students in Australia, who were clearly learning the same things.

■ **Yes, good speakers do all of those things!**  
Comment Posted on February 28, 2008 at 09:17 PM by Ms. Stilborn

■ **I think listening is a good thing while the teacher is talking.**  
Comment Posted on February 28, 2008 at 03:20 AM by sophia

■ **Hi Mrs Cassidy,  
I have troubles remembering to say please and thank you.  
Thank you for the video.**  
Comment Posted on March 5, 2008 at 02:48 AM by Jarvis



■ When we speak in class or ask a question we have to put our hand up  
Comment Posted on March 11, 2008 at 03:08 AM by Flynn

The idea that other students who live so far away are learning and thinking about the same things as we were was at first surprising and then affirming for my students.

Often, after my students have posted their learning, we've received a comment or an email from a teacher saying that our posts will be used to help their students learn something. I have used what other teachers and their students have posted in the same way. Sharing learning online can have a powerful impact on others, and you never know just what that impact will be. This will never happen, of course, if we tuck ourselves away in private spaces.

Whether you are working with five year olds or fifteen year olds, the students want to know that what they are learning has value. Sharing learning online often produces affirmation of that value—not just day by day but over time as a student's digital portfolio grows and becomes public evidence of his or her advancing knowledge and skills.



## Getting Started with Portfolios

The good news is that if you have already set up a blog for each of your students, they have everything they need to start a digital portfolio. You don't have to use a blog, of course. There are [other hosts](#) that you can use for a digital portfolio—a wiki is one good example. It is the content, not the web tool itself, that defines a "digital portfolio." That said, my discussion about portfolio development will focus on the blogging tool, because that's what I know best.



The first blog entries posted by my students are rarely readable. Like pre-writers everywhere, my students type random letters, their name, or text they can see on the walls of the room around them. Despite the fact that they cannot yet write anything that is readable to the general public, I have them post because I want them to begin to define themselves as writers.

Early one year, when my students did their first blog entry, we were in the computer lab—a room with very bare walls compared to our print-rich classroom environment. One of my students, Brad, could not find print on the walls to copy, so instead he typed the words he saw on the keyboard, writing “ibradcapslockshift.” When he was finished, he “read” it to me and told me that it said, “I like my blog.”

I did what I always do with beginning writing that is not yet readable to the general public. I put an editor’s note in brackets after his writing to show what he wanted it to say. My editor’s notes are frequent in the early going. They help assure that parents or others know what the student intended—the meaning is not lost because the child does not yet understand all of the conventions of writing.



If I did not let my pre-writer students post on their blogs, but instead waited until they could write prose correctly using writing conventions such as capital letters, periods, spaces between words and acceptable spelling, they would not be able to post for many months. Their parents would miss out on the opportunity to watch and be part of the incredible growth that takes place as children are learning to write. The students would be denied a global audience for their work and they would miss some encouraging early feedback in the form of comments.

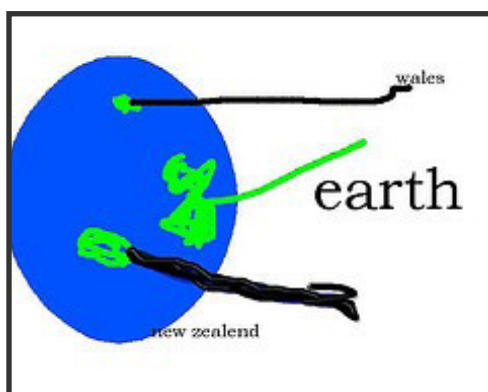
Instead, students learn to write in public, with the world cheering them on as they take those beginning steps. And through the whole process, they see themselves as writers.



## Adding Images to Student Blogs

While even a blog that contains only text can be considered a portfolio, there are many free web tools available that can produce blog-friendly visual content and make it possible for young children to show their learning in interesting and appropriate ways that go beyond text.

As the year progresses, we begin to use images on the students' blogs to illustrate their writing. We are fortunate to have a program called [Kidpix](#) on the computers in our lab, and the students have often used this program to draw pictures that help to demonstrate the ideas they put into their writing. We also use this drawing program to showcase our learning in math. The students use the Kidpix stamping feature to make patterns, the shape tools to show geometric shapes, and the drawing tools to illustrate a number story. I help them to save their finished products and then post these images on their blogs to add to their digital portfolio.



This same drawing program has allowed us to draw and label models of the earth to go with our science curriculum, to sketch pictures of the responsibilities the students have at home for our social studies objectives, or to make

columns of healthy and unhealthy snacks as part of our health curriculum.

Although it's nice to have the many choices provided by a purchased drawing program, there are other options. Several free online drawing programs allow students similar opportunities for expression. [Paint by ABCya](#) and [Crayola](#) are currently my favorites. Once they've created an image on screen, simply take a screenshot (see sidebar below) and post it on their blog. If you have access to iPads, [Draw Free](#) is an easy and versatile app for the children to use for images and [Doodle Buddy](#) is a free drawing app that has a selection of stamps for patterning. I have also often had the students draw or paint images on paper and then take a picture of it with a camera so that these could be posted online.





## Capturing a Screenshot of Students' Work

*To save an image on a PC computer:*

*Push the print screen key. Open the Paint program on your computer. Click on the screen with a right mouse click and select paste. Use the cropping tool in Paint to make a box around only the part of the image you want. Right click on the screen again and choose copy. This will copy only the part of the screen that you wish to save (the child's drawing, pattern etc.). Choose file, new and don't save. In the blank Paint screen, right click and choose paste. If the white "background" is larger than the image you have pasted, click on the white background and drag the bottom right corner of it up until it is the same size as the pasted image. Save this image to your files by using the file, save menu at the top.*

*To save an image on a Mac computer:*

*Hold down the command, shift and 4 keys all at the same time. Move the cursor that appears to the top left corner of what you want to capture. Left click and hold down as you drag this cursor across the image you want to capture until it draws a box around what you want to save. When you release the mouse click, the image will be saved to your desktop.*

*To save an image on an iPad:*

*Many drawing programs have a save to photos feature, but if the app you use does not, you can capture the entire screen by pressing the home button and the off button at the same time. This will save a screenshot to your photos.*

## Adding Sound to Student Blogs

Posting audio on your blog (sometimes called "podcasting") has become much easier with the creation of online tools that make it simple to record and embed (see sidebar) a sound file into blog posts. My current favorite for this is the voice recording tool [Audioboo](#). Students can create a "boo" (sound clip) on either a computer, or on an iPad (or other mobile device) using the [Audioboo app](#).

The [Audioboo app](#) gives a voice (literally!) to pre-writers. After students record their story, ideas, reading, etc., they can add





a picture to their “boo.” From the app, you can share your message directly to Twitter, or go to your online account (it is free and required if you use the app) and grab the embed code.

## What is Embedding?

*Embedding in this book refers to html code. This code tells the computer to display either a video or a photo or some other artifact. For example, YouTube videos have an embed code that allows you to put a video into a blog or wiki. This embed code `<iframe width="640" height="360" src="http://www.youtube.com/embed/JYOCV54S9CE?rel=0" frameborder="0" allowfullscreen></iframe>` tells a computer to put a video called Primary Digital Portfolios into a webpage. (Check your blog's Help section for instructions.)*

*Embed codes always begin with < and end with >. Many websites provide codes such as this to enable you to share pictures, videos, digital books etc. that are created and/or stored on their site.*

## Adding Video and More

With this app, my students have recorded themselves speaking about a book they enjoyed or giving directions. These recordings are included in their online portfolios. We also use this tool a couple of times per year to record our reading fluency and add that to our online portfolios. Audiboo is also a great option for older students who have difficulty communicating through writing.

Croak.it! is another voice recording app with an even more kid-friendly interface. No account sign-in is required. Instead of an embed code, it generates a URL which can be copied and pasted to share anywhere, including a blog entry.

After we began taking pictures with a digital camera, it occurred to me that the camera's video capabilities meant we could create movies for our blogs as well. We began to make short movies of students demonstrating different kinds of learning: talking about math concepts, explaining a poster they had created, or showing their understanding of the concept of ordering.



### Dinosaur Subtraction



When I mention the possibility of video in digital portfolios, I see many people cringe. Your video does not have to be a professional production (YouTube has certainly taught us that), and it does not have to reveal who the students are. I often make videos that I post on our classroom blog to show what is happening in our classroom. These videos show all of the children (with parent permission), but you have no idea which child has which name.

When the students post a video on their own blog, it is a different issue. Now the viewer has a first name to associate with anything that is posted, so I do not want the child's face to be seen. When we make videos that demonstrate individual learning, we take pains to hide the identity of the subject by only showing the student's hands or *their feet*, or we use *puppets* or *shadows*. Here's an example, where a student uses a Common Craft-styled presentation (see Chapter 1) to show his understanding of Silent E:

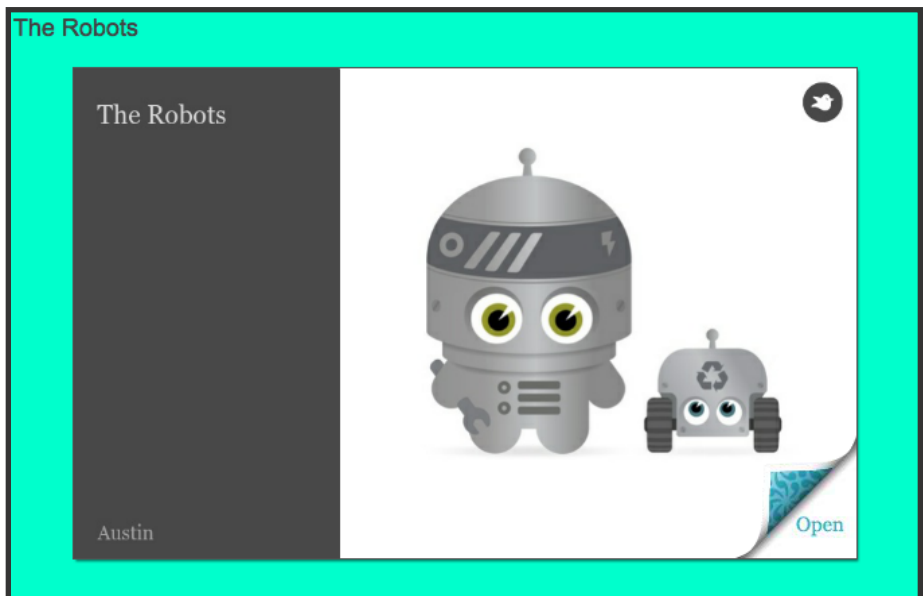
### Silent E



Since I usually have the students make the videos of each other, the camera moves around a lot, and the subject is often not as clearly shown as it might be, but I consider the filming to be part of the learning, and to me the learning is more important than a perfect final product.

## Six Year Olds Can Make a Movie

*The iMovie app can be used with even very young children. Photos and videos can be put into the movie directly from the photos app and students can record their voices along with it. The app includes background music choices. This is an app that grows with the student's age and ability. For example, my students each made videos with [directions for making muffins](#).*



Tools such as [Storybird](#) allow the students to write “books” that can be embedded on their blog. Our Storybird books often have been just [stories](#), but they have sometimes presented [math story problems](#) or served as a way to showcase student learning about a particular subject. Students of all ages, by the way, love and can use this tool to learn and show learning. Storybird has recently changed their entire site so that it now works smoothly on an iPad as well as a computer.

Recently, we've also begun using screencasting apps for iPads such as [ShowMe](#) or [ScreenChomp](#) (both free). These apps will record the students speaking as they draw, print words or



both. We've used these to show the "er" sound and the silent e rule or how to count by two's or to explain their thinking in a story problem. Educreations is another app that I like to use to showcase student learning. With this app, the students can create "pages," insert text or pictures and record their voice. This is a great tool for demonstrating and storytelling.



## From Computers to iPads

When we blogged from computers, the beginning of the school year meant that most of our blogging was only text, as the students became accustomed to the blogging tool. Gradually, as the children learned to use new tools, various non-text artifacts were added. By the end of the school year, these digital portfolios reflected each child's learning in many subject areas from the first week of school until the last. In addition to showing the development of our writing skills, we showed our learning in language arts, mathematics, science, social studies and health. We took pictures of posters or other things the students made, or posted combinations of these if we felt that using only one tool was not adequate to show what we knew.

### AppTalk: Apps for Blogging

*Most blogging platforms offer an app to allow access to your blog from a mobile device.*



*My students use the [Edublogs app](#) on our iPads. I love the kid-friendly interface that allows the students to take pictures of their work or draw a picture on their iPad and seamlessly insert it into their blog.*

*The Kidblog app is also built with students in mind and offers seamless upload of images from the photo app onto the students' blogs. This is a valuable feature!*

Recently, I was fortunate to obtain a class set of iPads, which the children learned to use quickly and intuitively. It's also easy for them to put their learning into a blogging app. As a result, we add artifacts much more often and much sooner than in previous school years. The iPads also make it easier for me to give the children opportunities to choose.

The first choice students make is in what they post online. While I do ask the students to post about specific topics we have been studying, they know they can also post about learning of any kind. When cold weather forced a spate of indoor recesses, many of my students posted pictures of the [villages](#) or [Lego creations](#) they generated during those times. Others chose to post [their drawings](#). The iPad camera and our Edublogs iPad app make this seamless.

My students also have a choice about the tool they use to demonstrate their learning. We often all use the same tool, especially when we are learning to use a new one, but once the “how” has been established, the students can choose the “which one.” And it doesn't have to be a digital tool. It always interests me how many students will choose markers, paper and tagboard instead. The photo and video capabilities of the iPad means that their handiwork can be displayed online no matter which physical or digital media they chose. (Much the same can be said, of course, about other tablet devices.)

I am a teacher who values giving students choice as often as possible. The content of the students' portfolios reflects this and no two blogs have all of the same entries.





## Four Screencasting Apps for Young Children

- [\*ScreenChomp\*](#) is a free app that allows you to draw and to record your voice. It is useful for visualizing and retelling, explaining math concepts etc.
- Using [\*Explain Everything\*](#), students can create pages, insert images or drawings from the photo app and record their voices. I find it useful for sequencing, for storytelling and for summarizing learning.
- [\*Draw and Tell HD\*](#) allows students to draw or write and then record their voice. The app includes lots of backgrounds, textured drawing and stamps.
- Using [\*ShowMe\*](#), students can draw, write words or demonstrate concepts, recording their voice at the same time. The app also provides for sharing, including an embed code.

Besides the content of the articles on the blog, I want the students to have an opportunity to make the blog their own personal space. To facilitate this, I let them make choices about background colors, images and some of the contents of their sidebar. If you look at the sidebars on the blogs of some of my previous students, you will see [\*pictures they have drawn\*](#), their [\*self descriptions\*](#), [\*virtual pets\*](#) and [\*wild background colors\*](#). These extras vary from year to year, but they are important in establishing a sense of ownership. Each blog takes on some of the personality of its creator. The students all love to put their learning online in a space that has been personally tailored by them.

### Getting Parents Involved

In Chapter 4, I talked about the parent information night that I have at the beginning of each school year. This is where I show parents, guardians and family members what we did the year before with our blogs—the writing, the audio recordings, the images and the video—and talk about this year's possibilities. I share the idea of the "digital portfolio" and tell them that they can expect to watch their child's growth online. Of course I make sure that the parents know how to find our classroom blog on the Web and to do the basic navigation once they get there. And I always urge them to comment when they can and be part of the learning.





Parents have the opportunity to visit their child's digital portfolio and see the growth and learning whenever they are near a computer. With a simple comment, they can respond directly to what they see. When one of my students posted a [recording of herself reading](#) on her blog, her mother sent her this message.

Hi Sabrina. Great Job Reading! You are doing so well learning how to read. I am very proud of you. Love Mom  
Comment Posted on November 7, 2010 at 08:33 AM by Mom

A comment like this is extremely important to a child. Her mother listens to her read at home, but this comment, read aloud with the class at school, makes a connection between her home and school life in a way that few other things can.

When it is time for [student-led conferences](#) at my school, my students each choose several blog posts which they think represent their best work to talk about with their parents. Their parents have usually seen the posts from home, but they are riveted as their child explains what the learning was all about, what they have done well, and what they want to get better at. The students' and the parents' eyes shine with pride.

After our conferences, the parents can watch the blog with new eyes. They now know what skills their child is trying to master and are even more disposed to encourage their child appropriately through comments or face to face as they look at the blog together. As teachers, we know that this parental awareness and involvement is a key to the growth of our students.

I recently spoke to a couple of students who are now in grade eight at my school. They were part my second class of little bloggers when they were in grade one. When I asked them what they remembered about our year together, their memories were of blogging. One of them specifically mentioned her mom commenting on her blog and how cool that was. Although we had comments from many people writing from many places that year, the comments that had the most emotional impact and created a lasting memory for her were those from her mother.



## Connecting with Portfolios


That memory was created not as a result of a classroom celebration, a special guest or a field trip. It grew out of her parent's involvement in her learning through her online portfolio. To me that is the power of a classroom blog and of posting learning online.

When students post as they are learning, it opens up opportunities for unexpected interactions and further learning. One of my students posted this [picture and article](#) on his blog.

### Can you see a lot of man here

November 13, 2012 by atticus1c


Can you see a lot of man here rite now I hope you can see haw meny men are thare count them rite  
Now. It well help you. I think thare are 16 men haw meny do you think haw meny dos your dog think  
I'm Jost ceding. (just kidding)



Category Uncategorized | Edit | 3 Comments »

Here are the comments he received.

### 3 Responses to "Can you see a lot of man here"



Trina Crawford Says:  
November 14th, 2012 at 2:11 am e

My dog guessed 15 and thought she saw a bone drawn there, too!

Just kidding! 😊

Love the blog post! Well done!

Reply



Can you see why I love having my students post their learning online? Not only was the student able to see that others placed value on his writing, but he was able to laugh and interact with them as well, extending his reading and writing. More connections. More learning.



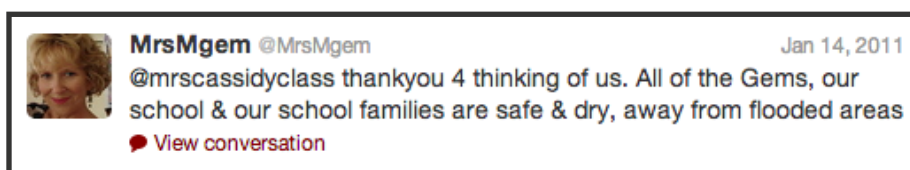
# 6 Connecting with Twitter

Although we have not been consistent Twitter users of our [classroom Twitter account](#), my six-year-old students have had some tremendous opportunities for learning through our involvement with the popular social media network.

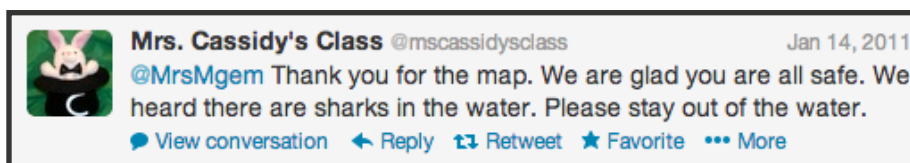
In 2011, my students had heard about the floods in Brisbane, Australia from their parents and came to school talking about the video footage they had seen on television. They were intrigued because of our classroom connection with a class of seven-year olds there called the [2M Gems](#). My class wondered if their Brisbane friends were safe, so as a group we composed this tweet.



Because the Gems were on summer vacation (below the equator) at the time, their [teacher](#) Amanda Marrinan replied for them.



She also sent us a [map of the area](#) that was flooded. In the meantime, my students had additional discussions with their parents and learned of another danger to their friends, so they sent this.



A few days later, Mrs. Marrinan sent this tweet.



Six year olds usually do not understand a lot about toxins, but they certainly understood that 190 million was a big number (gasp!) and that it meant that no one should go in the water. My primary-aged students were engaged in a world event that meant something to them because of the connection we had developed with the class in Australia.

## Authentic Writing

When we read and composed those tweets together on our interactive whiteboard, the students were reading and writing meaningful text—not something that I had contrived to teach them, like a phonics skill or a lesson about world events. They became concerned for their friends through reports in the media and wanted more information. They got their details first-hand, in a way that connected them directly to the people they were concerned about.

The tweets we composed together were authentic writing. They came from something that they wanted to say, questions they wanted answered, and they directed their messages to a real audience. Let's see: meaningful text, authentic writing and a real audience. Isn't that a good recipe for successful writing instruction? Core standards? The development of empathy for people in another culture and the beginnings of a worldview were just delightful side benefits.

As this vivid example demonstrates, Twitter is another way that I connect my classroom with the outside world, both far away and closer to home.

If you have lots of parents of your students who are already using Twitter, having a classroom account can be a great way to keep parents updated about what is happening in the classroom as it is happening in real time. By using a Twitter app on a mobile device, your tweets can include pictures or video that are a window for parents into the world of your classroom.



So Twitter is an excellent way to increase your connections to the children's families. And from a learning perspective, Twitter's great value comes from its ability to easily connect students with people, classrooms and events in other parts of the country or world.



## How Twitter Works

To understand how to use [Twitter](#) to connect your classroom, you first of all have to understand a few things about how Twitter works. If you are already using Twitter, you can skip this section and move right on to Using Twitter in the Classroom.

Like other social networks, Twitter asks you to create an account and to choose a username and password. After signing up, it's important to set up a profile. This profile, including a picture, lets people know who you are and is an essential part of a social network of any kind.

If you are setting up a classroom account, you may want to use a generic picture or a picture of your school rather than a picture of your students. The profile picture on Twitter is very small and individual students could not be seen anyway. You could take several pictures of objects in your classroom and ask your students to choose a picture to represent the class. (You can see the "rabbit in the hat" picture we chose in the tweet images above.) In your class bio, you do not have to say where you live if you would prefer not to, but it's a good idea to say the grade or age level of your students so that others know what to expect in the way of tweets.

With the account set up, Twitter users look for and choose people to "follow." When you follow someone, his or her tweets





will show up in your [account timeline](#). You can direct questions or comments to specific Twitter users by placing @ and then that user's name at the beginning of your tweet (for example, @mscassidysclass). Tweets can be up to 140 characters in length and can be used to send pictures and links.

There are lots of other aspects to Twitter, but this information should give you a start if you are a new user. You can find more tips in this [free guide for teachers](#).

## Twitter Is What We Make of It

*Twitter got a bad (or at least silly) reputation in its early years as a social network that consisted of people telling each other what they had for breakfast. While there is certainly some of that banal talk on Twitter, more and more teachers are finding it to be a useful teaching tool—and a wonderful form of professional development. I can turn to my professional Twitter network at any hour of any day and find interesting, often challenging ideas and links that have helped to stretch my thinking and make me a better teacher. I can tweet questions and get answers from people who live in another time zone, and I can share things that I am doing in my classroom to contribute to the learning of others. My professional address: @kathycassidy*

## Using Twitter in the Classroom

Using Twitter in your primary classroom is first of all about reading. (Isn't everything?) If you follow other classrooms, you can read their tweets to find out what other classrooms are doing, get a sense of what their classroom is like and discover similarities and differences between your class and theirs. If you are following an expert on a given topic, you can use Twitter to gather information. If you follow your school's Twitter feed, you can use what you read to learn about school happenings or upcoming events.

Second, Twitter is about writing tweets. Your classroom tweets can reflect what your class is learning in a particular subject area or the tweets can be questions about things that your children want to know. They can be directed at another Twitter user in particular (remember the @ that I referred to earlier?) or to the world in general.





How you use Twitter in your classroom depends a lot on the age of your students. If your students are not yet reading and writing, you will want your use of Twitter to be done mainly together as a class. When I begin using Twitter in my grade one classroom, the tweets are projected onto the interactive whiteboard in front of the students and we read them together, with someone tracking the words with a pointer. It is a shared reading experience.

At first, I do this tracking myself, but I turn this job over to the students as soon as I can. We write tweets in a similar way. We talk together about what we would like to say and then compose as a group. Reading and writing the tweets together works effectively with beginning and emerging readers and writers. It is a highly personal and authentic way to learn to write effectively and to ask and answer questions. I've also found it effective to help teach the importance of rereading what you write!

If you are teaching slightly older or more fluent readers and writers, the students can begin to do the reading and tweeting themselves. Like all aspects of reading and writing, modeling and doing it together many times before asking the students to do it on their own is important. Some teachers assign a daily tweeter or tweeters whose job it is to write tweets and



respond to the tweets of others through the school day. These classrooms usually have a computer or other device that is used mainly for this purpose, so that whenever the student(s) want to tweet there is not a lot of time lost in logging on and navigating to the Twitter site.

## Finding Classrooms to Follow

If you are a primary teacher who is looking for other classrooms to follow and connect with, start by going to the homepage of any primary classroom Twitter account (for example ours is [@mscassidysclass](#)) and see which classrooms they are following and who follows them. Once you find an interesting class, look at which classrooms that classroom follows or is followed by, and so on. Look at bios, at the things each classroom tweets about, and at how often they tweet. (Sometimes you will find a link to their classroom blog on their Twitter homepage. See what you find there.) If the classroom or person looks interesting and you would like their tweets to appear in your timeline, click on the “follow” button on their homepage.

Although it can be interesting to follow other classrooms that are much the same as yours, a lot of learning can take place by following classrooms of other grade levels, in other time zones or in other countries. These connections really open your classroom to learning that can be serendipitous and give your students a much broader worldview. I make a special effort to include classrooms from other countries, even if they write in a different language than our own. For primary students, being able to recognize that written words are not in their own language is a step in literacy.

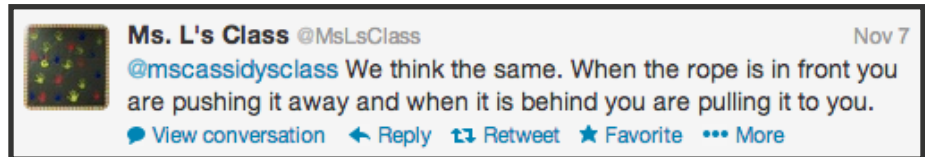
Don’t worry if a classroom doesn’t follow you back. You can still learn from them, and if you want to interact directly with that class, simply place @yourtwittername in your tweet and they will see it.

Recently, my students saw a tweet from a [grade one classroom in British Columbia](#) whose students were studying physical forces. They asked what others thought about skipping rope. Was it pushing or pulling? That tweet prompted a lively discussion in my classroom with both sides defending their position. Finally a student suggested that perhaps it was both. After some thought, the other students agreed, and we responded to the question.





Later that day, the other class responded.



Forces are not in my curriculum, but learning how to think through and solve problems like this definitely is. This conversation and learning would not have taken place in my classroom if we had not been connected through Twitter.

## Who Else to Follow

Many classrooms are now using Twitter to connect with the world outside of schools. There is a wide range of activity going on in the Twitter-verse, with millions of choices about whom you can follow. The choices about which Twitter users to follow in my classroom are made by thinking about who we can interact with and who we can learn from.

I purposefully keep the number of classes that we follow very low because of the predisposition of my students to want to read every tweet. One year, I followed a grade two classroom that tweeted voraciously. The student assigned to tweet in their classroom often tweeted every ten to fifteen minutes throughout the entire day. Each morning when we checked into Twitter to see what was happening, there were many, many second grade tweets from this classroom to wade through. The sheer volume of their tweets made it hard for us to find the tweets of other classrooms.

Together, we used the vocal second graders as a learning experience about what made a good tweet, and I learned to check an account's tweet frequency before clicking on *follow*. Of course, the opposite of this is also true. It can be very disappointing for young children to check Twitter and to find that no one has written anything, so a careful balance is needed.



Choices about who to follow are entirely up to you and will depend on your purpose for using Twitter and the interests/age of your students. Besides classrooms, here are some random ideas about who you might follow that may help you to get started.

- People or groups of significance to your classroom such as the principal or the local animal shelter.
- A zoo. Many zoos have Twitter accounts: three are the San Diego Zoo ([@sandiegozoo](#)), Australia Zoo ([@AustraliaZoo](#)) or the Smithsonian's National Zoo ([@NationalZoo](#))
- Japan Culture Agency ([@JCAofficial](#))
- Experts on subjects that interest your class such as astronaut Gregory H. Johnson ([@Astro\\_Box](#)) or Chris Hadfield ([@Cmdr\\_Hadfield](#)), the Canadian flight engineer who did a great job tweeting students while on the International Space Station.
- Someone who is tweeting "as" a character or person.
- Authors or characters that your students love such as [@The Pigeon](#) (from Mo Willem's books) or [@peterhreynolds](#), author of The Dot and Ish.
- News. [Teaching Kids News](#) ([@teachkidsnews](#)) aggregates some kid-friendly news articles and tweets them. Some slightly older classes could benefit from this Twitter account.
- A National or State Park near your school. For example, Point Pelee National Park ([@PointPeleeNP](#)) in Ontario, Canada frequently tweets about the wildlife living and arriving in the park throughout the spring, summer and fall.

## Learning/Sharing with Twitter in the Classroom

Now that you are following some Twitter accounts, it's time to think about what you will share in your account. The ways that Twitter can be used in a classroom are limited only by the imagination of the teacher and students, but to get you thinking, here are some of the ways classrooms can and are using this social media in their classroom.

*Tweeting about classroom happenings.* Many parents and grandparents are on Twitter (or would be if they could follow their child's classroom) and love to read the updates their children post. Tweets provide jumping off points for conversations with their child later and help parents to feel part of what is going on.



*Tweeting reminders.* Some teachers use Twitter as one way to send out reminders about class outings, special events, homework reminders or items that need to be brought to class.

*Connecting with other classrooms.* By following the tweets of other primary classrooms, students gain a unique sense of the world outside of their everyday life. Classes can “talk” virtually with other classes through their tweets.

*Backchanneling* is a kind of communal note taking, in this case using Twitter hashtags (see sidebar) that are unique to your activity or event. Adults often backchannel during lectures or keynotes by typing thoughts shared by the speaker that strike them as significant or tweeting their opinions of what was said. Few primary teachers are lecturing (hopefully), but primary students who are emerging or fluent writers can, with modeling and practice, use this technique during a [video](#), a guest speaker or as they read the same book as others in their class or other classrooms.

*Tweet as the class mascot or another character.* Have the students imagine that they are tweeting for the stuffed dog that sits on a shelf in your classroom. How would he phrase a tweet? What would his perspective be on classroom activities? This is a great way to help students understand the concept of voice when writing.

## Hashing Things Out

*Another useful part of Twitter for educators is hashtags (#). Hashtags are a way of aggregating tweets together. The idea was actually dreamed up by Twitter users, not the Twitter company!*

*Here's an example: grade one/first grade teachers on Twitter often use the hashtag #1stchat in their tweets if they think a resource they are sharing will be useful to other grade one teachers or if they have a question that is specific to their grade level. Other grade one teachers can search Twitter using #1stchat to find tweets posted by any user who adds this hashtag. There is also a #PreKchat, a #kinderchat, a #2ndchat, #3rdchat, etc.*





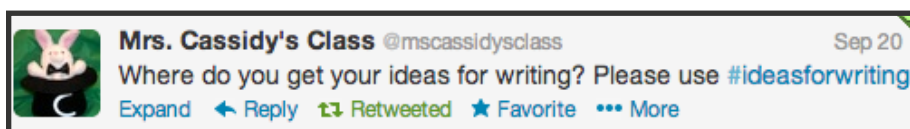
*These hashtags and others can be a great way to accelerate your own learning on Twitter; you can use them to find out more information about any topic you want to pursue. Where do you find a list of hashtags? There is no official list; people make them up and others may gravitate toward them. It's very democratic. [But here's a place to start.](#)*

## Twitter Across the Curriculum (and Hashtags)

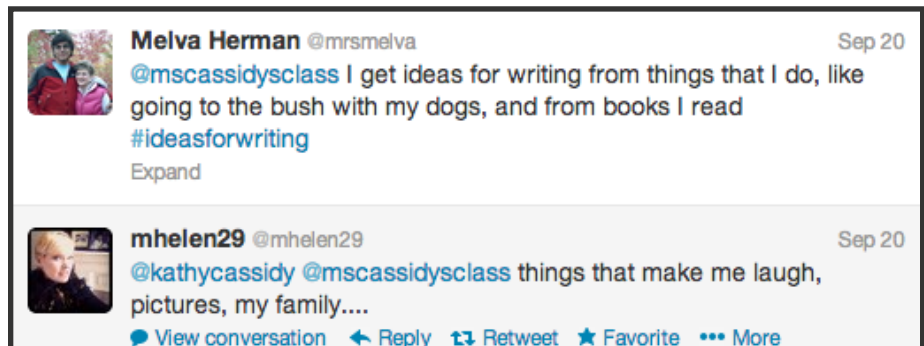
The immediate curriculum connections for Twitter are the reading and writing ones—and they are important. Some teachers are also exploring ways to use Twitter in other subject areas.

For example, students can direct questions about space to an astronaut on Twitter, queries about rocks to a geologist, or inquiries about plants to a botanist. Using the Twitter search feature (it's right at the top of the screen), entering a term such as entomologist pulls up a list of Twitter users who are experts in that particular field. A tweet that includes @username will get to that expert's Twitter feed. Very few people will not respond to genuine questions from children in a social media space (assuming they see them).

Hashtags are [another effective way to use Twitter](#). When my students were learning about the writing trait of voice, we made gingerbread men and took pictures of them in various locations around our school. Then, we used hashtags and joined with other classrooms in tweeting about what a gingerbread man might say ([#SaystheGBMan](#)). On another occasion, we imagined secrets that Santa might have and giggled as we first wrote and then read the tweets written by our classmates and other primary students from around North America. ([#SantaSec2012](#)). We practiced writing riddles with the [#riddles13](#) hashtag (oh, the fun the students had with that one) and [joined with other classes](#) to tweet [#100storiesof100](#) on the 100th day of school. When we were working on the writing trait of ideas, we sent out this tweet:



Notice that we put the hashtag #ideasforwriting into our tweet. We were asking the people who responded to us to use that hashtag so that all of their responses could be searched for and found in one place on Twitter. People responded.



Other people responded when I re-tweeted my class's tweet with my own personal Twitter account.



Later, several students in a second grade classroom also responded.





Did these responses help my students to understand where others got their ideas for writing? Did it help them to realize that others thought about the writing process just as they did? Did it help them as they thought about what they would write about themselves? Yes, yes and yes! Another example of the power of connected learning.

## AppTalk: Twitter's Official App

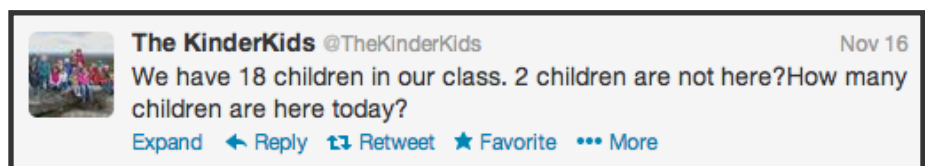
*The Twitter app ([versions](#) are available for every platform) is easily navigable by young children. Images can be placed into tweets directly from a photo app. If you are using the Twitter app with hashtags, a highlight is that it remembers a hashtag used on any other device with that account. For example, if you wanted to use the hashtag #100storiesof100, the second child would only have to type #1 and the hashtag would show up as an option. This is a tremendous help with young children if you want them to aggregate content. For teachers who have their own separate account, I love the ease of switching between accounts.*

## Tips for Success with Twitter in the Classroom

Every person who uses Twitter has slightly different ideas about how that tool should be used. Having said that, I like to have the opinions of other people when I start something new, so here, from my perspective, are some ideas to help you be successful in using Twitter with your class.

- Choose a Twitter name that shows you are a classroom, not an individual.
- Keep your personal Twitter account separate from your class account.
- Decide ahead of time who will do the tweeting—you or the students. This can evolve, but think about how you will start.
- Think carefully about how many people/classrooms you want to follow and how you will use Twitter in your classroom. If you class insists on reading every tweet and you follow a few classrooms that are frequent tweeters, there may be no time left for other language arts instruction!
- Initially, it sounds like a great idea to follow parents who might be on Twitter, but most people are not thinking about five year olds when they tweet a snarky comment about the person ahead of them at the grocery store or make some other complaint. Let parents follow you, but don't follow back.
- If you are going to have the students do the tweeting independently, you will need to do extensive modeling together first and set up some rules about tweeting. These rules might include only using positive language and not mentioning any student by name. Whatever your expectations, they need to be clear. When my students begin tweeting on their own, all tweets have to be viewed by me before they are published. As the students show responsibility in this, I allow them to do it on their own.

Twitter is just one more way that I have found to effectively connect my classroom with the outside world. As with the other tools I use, we never really know what kind of learning will result from our interactions there.



When we saw the tweet, my grade one students were fascinated that we had the same number of students in our own class, but my grade twos (I had a split class that year) were instantly all about solving the math problem. We responded with this.



Later, we heard back from the Kinderkids.



"We got the same answer" and "They are learning about counting backwards too?" were the delighted responses in my classroom. One more example of connected learning and the impact it can have.



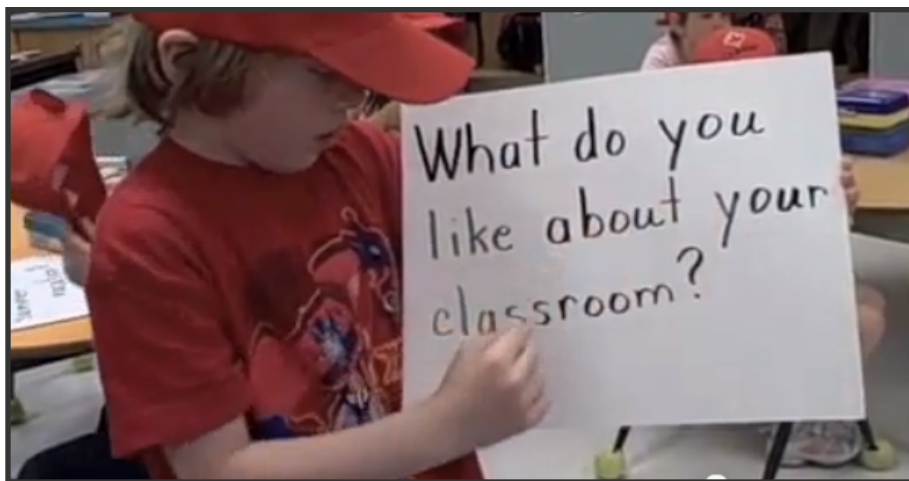
# 7 Other Ways to Connect

## Connecting Through Video

Skype, Twitter and a classroom blog are not the only ways you can connect with others online. A few years ago, I received an email from a teacher in Korea. His students were older (about 10), and he was teaching them to speak English. His class did not have an online presence such as a blog or Twitter account, but he wondered if there was a way we could connect our two classes. The times of their school day did not overlap with ours, so Skype wasn't a good solution. We decided to try connecting our classes by sharing videos.

Before we made our videos, we both gave our students a bit of background about the other class, such as where they lived and how old they were. Then we asked them what they wondered. What questions did they have for the other students? What did they want to know about the other class's school and town and lifestyle?

Some of the questions my class had for the Korean children were the same as the things they wondered about us. Other questions were totally different. Once we knew what we wanted to ask, *both classes* planned and filmed themselves answering the questions. My students demonstrated their burgeoning reading skills by reading the questions aloud for the camera as well.





My students were enthralled by the fact that these “big kids” were just learning to speak English and that we could help them to acquire that skill. With a growing awareness of their own language, my class listened to the accents and grammar of the Korean students as they spoke English as a second language. I could almost see the cogs in their brain fitting into place. “They don’t know English good, do they?” They were fascinated by some of the Korean students’ answers as well. “How come they don’t have a playground apparatus?” “Why don’t they eat sandwiches for lunch?” It was a stretching, learning experience for both classes.

During another school year, [a teacher from the International School of Belgrade](#) contacted me. She had students from many different countries in her classroom in the Serbian capital city. She also wondered if we could connect using video. The opportunity for my students to use their reading and speaking skills -- to plan and produce a video introducing our class-- was once again too good to pass up. These students had different questions for each other than my Canada-to-Korea group, but again they were learning about another school and about children whose lives were the same in many ways but different in so many others.

## Video Serendipity

On yet another occasion, our video exchange was unexpected. My students planned and [filmed a segment to introduce ourselves](#) to [some classes](#) with whom we were doing an online project. Some other students in Greece happened to see the video we posted and [made their own video](#) (speaking Greek, but with subtitles), modeled after ours, to introduce themselves and take us on a tour of their primary-aged classroom. Again, my students were fascinated.

“Are they speaking Chinese?”, they wondered. “Are they speaking French?” “Their letters are upside down!” “Look, their lowercase N is a v!” “Apple should be for ‘a’, but it’s for ‘m’ in their alphabet!” “They have a stage in their classroom!” They were more than a little mystified.





We decided to comment on the Greek students' classroom blog. The children laughed along with me as we tried to figure out which of the Greek words on their blog might mean “comment” in English. I asked the students if, after seeing the video, they had any questions for the Greek children. At first, their questions came slowly, but then the deluge began.

“Do you have water bottles?” “Where do you put your backpacks?” “What kind of trees do you have?” “Do you have a playground?” “What kind of food do you eat?” “Do you have computers at your school?” The questions filled several pages of chart paper.

Since we had too many questions to include in our comment, I approached their teacher to see if she would be willing to connect through a Skype call. Because of the time difference, we arranged to talk to her from her home. Exhibiting the incredible patience that primary teachers are often blessed with, she good-naturedly answered question after question that the children had prepared—and then more as the children moved on to new questions that had just occurred to them.

This year, we chose to once again make a [\*video to show off our classroom\*](#) and to ask others to show us theirs. A [\*classroom from Germany\*](#) reciprocated by guiding us through the highlights of their learning space. [\*Classrooms from Ontario and Vermont\*](#) also took up the challenge.





All of these video exchanges are instances of magical learning about places my students have never before heard of and will probably never see for themselves. It came about because teachers around the world were willing and able to integrate the tools of connection into their classroom instruction.



## Making a Video

Although the videos we made that sparked these connections with Korea, Serbia, Greece, Germany, Ontario and Vermont were edited, it is not necessary to have film editing skills to connect with others using video. We made videos for many years before I learned how to edit. We kept the videos fairly short, planned what would happen carefully, and if we didn't



like the way it turned out, we redid it. The students themselves were the judges of this. They always knew whether it was their best work.

Almost everyone now owns some kind of device that is capable of recording video. This could be a small camera, a laptop, a tablet or your personal mobile phone. No matter what the tool, simply point it at the students and record. Then upload the video to a video sharing site such as [YouTube](#), [Vimeo](#), [SchoolTube](#) or [TeacherTube](#). I have used my YouTube account to post most of the videos from my classroom over the years—it's nice [to have them all in one place](#).

### AppTalk: iPad Video Trick

*If you use an iPad to record your video, and then put the video into iMovie, you can upload the video directly to your YouTube or Vimeo account (as well as other sharing options).*

As with all that I do, I am careful to protect the students' identities when we create a video for public sharing. I ensure that their names are never mentioned, and that they are not near any classroom item that happens to have their name on it. While one of these stickers or nameplates occasionally shows up in a video that I make, it is never the name of the particular child that is being filmed. For example, there may be a child's book bin with the name Harley in the shot, but you can be sure that Harley is not the child in that segment of video.

Even without posting the video on a blog, you can email a link to that video to another class to share it with them. The wonderful thing about video sharing sites is that they provide an "embed code" (at YouTube, click on Share and then Embed to see it), and if you copy that snippet of code language and paste it into a post on your blog, the video will be there for everyone who reads your blog to see. The video could be about introducing your classroom, about something you are learning, even a challenge to other classes—direct or implied (as the video here demonstrates:





Whatever you choose to do, you are sharing a part of your classroom with the world, and you never know what connections will result from this simple act.

## The Evolution of My Videos

*I have been posting videos of what is happening in our classroom to YouTube since 2007. [All of the videos are still there](#), showing the evolution of my own learning as well as that of my students. My camera quality has improved over that time, as have my editing skills, but I am still learning about this along with my students. You can go back and see our first shaky attempts and how we have improved. In fact, some of our early attempts are now a bit embarrassing, but it would be hypocritical of me to not be willing to be transparent about my learning curve when I expect my students to be. I tell you this to reassure you that you do not have to be perfect, that it is OK to make mistakes and that you, too, can model learning for your students using this medium.*

## Connecting Through Wikis

In grade one, we focus on the numbers up to 100. Like many kindergarten and first grade classes, my class counts the days of school and has a celebration on the 100th day. Counting and waiting to reach that magic day gives the students a sense of how big the number "one hundred" really is.

One year, when I had a grade one/two split class, the grade twos needed to understand the numbers to 1000. I wanted to have them collect one thousand of something so that they would grasp that larger number. I thought of and discarded





many ideas as impractical. I wanted whatever we collected to be inexpensive and very small—I didn't want to use a lot of classroom space to store our collection. Then I had an idea! What if we collected names, virtually? It would be very inexpensive (in fact, free!) and would take up NO space in the classroom. We decided to do it, and used a [wiki to collect the names](#).

A [wiki](#) is an editable multi-user online document. You can choose who can contribute to this document in the settings. I chose to allow anyone to edit it. On the wiki, I set up a table and we added the names of all the students in our class. Then, I posted a [link on our classroom blog](#) to ask people to help us by adding their names. We did this before social media had become the giant force it now is, so I had no other way to ask for help. Truthfully, I did not expect that we would get one thousand names, but I hoped that if we got a few hundred names, the students would get an idea of how long it took to get a thousand of something and realize that it was a really big number.



Each day the students checked the wiki to see how many names we had. To the students' joy and to my surprise, the number of names continued to grow. In fact, as time went on, people seemed to want to leave more information. Some people left a link to their own online space or a note about where they were from or a short message for my students.



Each day one of the students would check the wiki and read the number beside the last name that had been added. On some days we would rewrite this number somewhere in the classroom and wonder at what a large number it seemed to be. The students marveled at each number, larger than the ones before it. They were totally engaged, and they learned to read and write the numbers to one thousand in an authentic way that was far more interesting to them than any number-writing worksheet could ever have been. Strangers who had never met my students were willing to take the time to add their names to help those young students to learn. And learn they did.

Any time they were able to (including at home at night), my grade two students would go to the wiki and read the names of people who had contributed to the wiki. They wondered aloud about the names, about where these people were from, and about what they were like. They not only learned how to read and write numbers in the hundreds, they learned that other people they didn't even know could contribute to their learning experience.

Despite my doubts when we first set up the wiki, we were actually able to get one thousand names that year. That experience, perhaps more than any other, taught me the value of connected learning. People who really had no idea of where Moose Jaw was were willing to take the time to help us learn.

And that wiki? It is still online and although the project officially finished several years ago, people continue to add their names. It now contains almost two thousand names. Every few days another name gets added!

## Other Connected Wikis

The success we had with our numbers-and-names wiki led us to use wikis for other projects. One year, the students and I decided together that we wanted to show how much they knew about the letters of the alphabet by making a [video](#) about every letter and its sound. We began posting these on an [alphabet wiki](#). A class of first graders in Alabama joined us by also creating and adding videos for each letter. Other classes added one or two videos as well. Together, we built a “textbook” for primary children about the letters of the alphabet. Now each fall when we review alphabet letters, I show the children the work that students from Saskatchewan and Alabama did years earlier, and they learn from their peers!



[Maria Knee](#), my kindergarten teacher friend in New Hampshire, started a [one hundredth day wiki](#) that we contributed to. Her goal was to have pictures of objects for each number up to one hundred. Maria's class began by taking photos of groups of objects—one photo for each number—and posting the photos along with a brief explanation beside each number. Since in this instance, my class comprised "the big kids," we took responsibility for [some of the larger numbers](#). Other classes also helped to build this virtual counting book.

## Setting Up a Wiki

Wikis are not the ideal tool for every project, but when used well, they can have tremendous educational impact. If you are interested in using a wiki with your class, I would recommend using the educator-friendly [Wikispaces](#). You can set up an account and your first free wiki in two minutes. Teachers use wikis for [online portfolios](#), for collaborative projects and for [connecting with other classes](#). Once you have your wiki set up, click on the edit button and add to it just as you would to any document. By editing the wiki permissions, you can choose to allow others to edit the wiki, or only allow editing by members. Wikispaces has a fairly comprehensive help section that should cover any questions you have.

## Google Documents

Some years ago, Google began offering several free office-type tools (word processing, spreadsheets, slides) online. The products made with these tools "[live in the Cloud](#)" and can be shared publicly or privately, as the document owner (you) directs. The most popular of these tools is probably the [Google Doc](#). A Google document is similar to a wiki in that it allows the creation of a document that can be edited by only you, by selected individuals, or by anyone on the web.

One of the outcomes in my social studies curriculum is for students to understand that different families and cultures have different foods, customs etc. (Could there be any better example of the potential value of connected learning?!) One year we talked together about what each of the families represented in my classroom had for breakfast. The students and I decided that we wanted to find out what others outside of our classroom community had for breakfast as well.

To help us collect our information, I set up a Google document titled [Foods We Eat for Breakfast](#) and asked people, via our







We also used the command + F search function (see sidebar) to find out how many times some of the particular foods were mentioned.

## The Find Command

*This is a useful command if you are searching for a particular word on a page of the Internet, or if you want to know how many times a word is mentioned on a certain webpage. Simply hold down Command + F on a Mac computer or Control + F on a PC computer and a search box will appear at the top of the webpage. Type in the word you are searching for and each instance of it on that page will be highlighted.*

I could have just told the children that people around the world eat different things for breakfast. I could have suggested foods that these other people might eat. I could have read them books. I could even have bought the same Vegemite and shared it with the children. But the process of the students actually collecting information from other people around the world, and of discovering the commonalities and differences for themselves, made the experience so much richer and more meaningful. If not always more tasty!



13 peepl drec jos  
5 peopl eat bacin and eggs  
7 pepol et ot meol

*Thirteen people drink juice. Five people eat bacon and eggs.  
Seven people eat oatmeal.*

The children reflected on some of the things they learned from our breakfast project in [another Google Doc](#). This was an interesting experience in same-time editing as we used several computers at once, and some children tried to write in the same space in the document as someone else in the class. In the end, each of my students was able to figure out how to use the Google Doc tool and contribute what he or she had learned. Their reflections were typical first grade writing. (Translation provided for those of you who haven't had a lot of practice reading the work of emerging writers.)

lots of peapol eat wofols  
sume peapol eat cofea and a bnan  
sume peapol eat tost with hunea

*Lots of people eat waffles. Some people eat coffee and a banana. Some people eat toast with honey.*

I have also found Google Docs to be a great choice when working on projects with other classes online. Sometimes there is material, such as contact information or project ideas that you want everyone to have access to and to contribute to, but you do not want that information to be public. The ability to share a document with only specific users is invaluable.

If you want to set up a Google document, you just need to have a Google account. You can get one for free by signing up at Google. (If you use Gmail or other Google services, you already have one ). Once you have that account set up, a search on YouTube will give you lots of videos that will guide you through how to create and use a document there.

## Getting Going with Google





Because Google also allows you to create forms, spreadsheets, presentations and drawings, it may often be a better choice than a wiki. It depends what you want to be able to do with the information you collect.

(Note: In the recent past, Google subsumed the Google Doc and related office tools under the name "Google Drive." The tools are the same - the label is different.)

## Online Stories with Storybird

If you are interested in writing stories with another class online, [Storybird](#) may be a good choice for you. This free teacher-friendly tool (a teacher account gives you the ability to set up and moderate private accounts for your students) has beautiful drawings to choose from that can inspire children to write. Students simply drag the pictures they wish to use onto the digital book, and then write the accompanying text. Once their story is finished, they can publish it and get an embed code to put the book into their blog or digital portfolio or any online space that they wish. For many teachers, one of the best parts of this tool is that (for a fee) you can actually have these books printed and mailed to you. Again, you can find many "how-to" videos on [YouTube](#) that will walk you through Storybird's features, which work equally well with traditional computers and touch devices.

Now for the collaboration feature! Authoring of a Storybird book can be shared with one other Storybird user. This could be someone in your class, or someone who lives far away. My class used this tool to co-write a [story about Friendship](#) with a fourth grade class from Pennsylvania. Although we begin to practice putting a problem and solution into our writing in grade one, many of my students do not really have a sense of these literary devices. As we shared the story back and forth, the fourth graders, with the wisdom of experience, were able to help guide the story to an appropriate ending.

## A Plethora of Possibilities

This chapter could go on for a long time listing other web tools that I have used to connect my classroom in some way with the world. There are truly a plethora of tools and services available online that do not just work, but can work well with primary-aged students. In recent years I have seen the number of teachers who are using tools to connect their primary classes swell. Finding these tools really just relies on a mindset that





looks for ways to connect and believes that children in the early grades can be global learners.

Is there an online space or tool that *you* like to use? Think about that tool in a new way. Think about the possibility of using that tool to connect your class with people outside of your classroom. How could your students use that tool to share or learn? Have an idea? What are you waiting for? Do it!



# 8 Open Your Classroom to the World



Although it hasn't always been the case, I consider myself very fortunate today to have various technologies at hand that allow my students to seamlessly connect with the world beyond our classroom door. Those five computers that got me started over a decade ago eventually stopped responding, and we were left with little technology for some years. (Most of iPads you see in some of the pictures here arrived in my classroom in the spring of 2012, after [\*I won a contest\*](#) sponsored by BestBuy Canada.)

## It's NOT about Lots of Technology

To connect, all you really need (in addition to an internet connection) is one device. That device could be a phone, a computer, a tablet or any other technology with internet capability. Even if all the technology I now have in my classroom were to disappear overnight, I would still find ways to connect with the outside world.

Amanda Marrinan, my Australian friend, has at times had no internet access in her classroom. Despite this, she has still connected her students through the use of her personal



**It's NOT about  
Always Being  
Successful**

smartphone account. Her prep (kindergarten) children use her phone to record their reading responses or to take pictures and [upload them to Twitter](#). She would love to have more options available, but until she does, she makes the most of what she has.

You can expect to encounter bumps in the road along your journey to a fully connected classroom. Not everything I have tried has been a tremendous success. One year, I decided to set up [wikis as collaborative stories](#) for the children to write on during center time. I had some strong writers that year and thought that it would work well for the students to write a story together. Since it was online, I reasoned, they could also work on it at home with their parents as well (they did!). Via our blog, I invited others to contribute (which they also did). The students prepared the stories by choosing a beginning, middle and end to what became six different stories. Their task on each wiki was to add details to make the story more interesting.

Overall, this project did not work well as a center activity. One of the stories, about a [hockey game](#), proved to be much more popular with my Canadian students than any of the other kids we partnered with. And since wikis can only be edited by one person at a time, we also had arguments over who got to edit which story and when. Engagement was high, but six year olds do not have a large capacity for allowing their friends to edit or delete what they have written. The whole project was less successful than I had imagined it would be.

I mentioned in Chapter 2 that my students and their parents sometimes came back to school in the evening so that we could have a face-to-face conversation over Skype with a [class of students](#) in Australia. For several years we made that connection work during what was the morning of the next day in Australia. As [the Australian students responded](#) to our questions and asked questions of their own wearing their adorable uniforms, with their charming Australian accents, and showed us the ocean view from the window of their school, our parents were learning right along with their children.

Then one year, there happened to be difficulties with the networks in Australia just at the time we gathered to connect. That meant no Skype. There I sat, with my students and



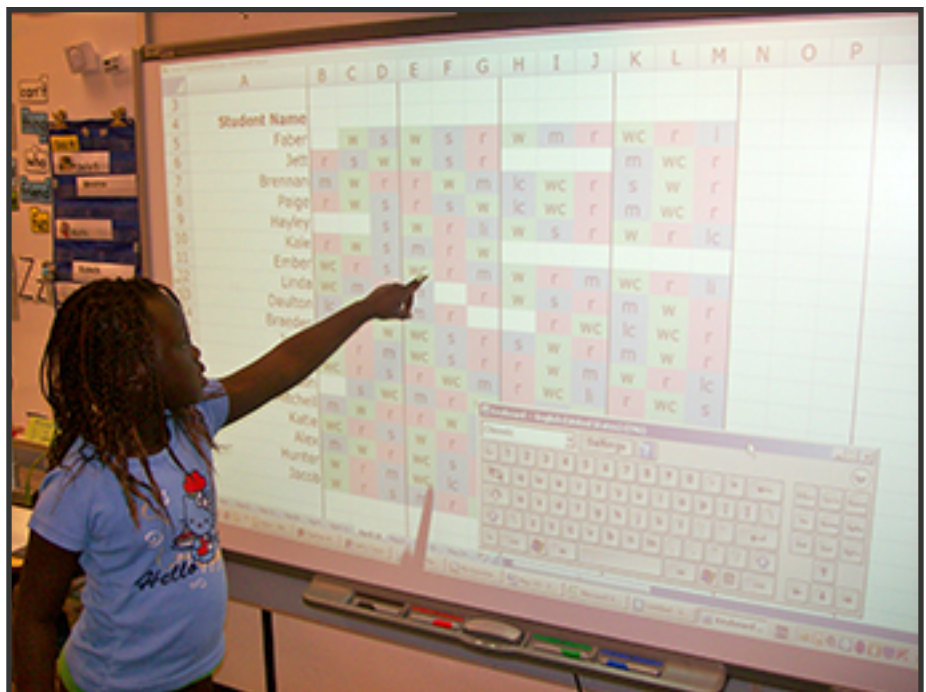
parents all in the classroom waiting for the big moment and nothing to show them. It was not one of my shining teacher moments.

There have been numerous occasions when a child has worked hard to complete a task using technology and through over-eagerness on his part or ineptitude on mine, the work has been lost. There have been issues with servers or internet access or hardware or software, sometimes at critical moments in our learning process. Things do not always go as planned.

I tell you this not to dissuade you from connecting and collaborating with other classes, but to encourage you to be a risk-taker. I want to be sure you understand that—like other things I do in my classroom—not everything works all the time for me. Despite this, the children and I keep going. We just try again, because the powerful learning that can only be tapped through connection makes the effort worthwhile.

## It IS about a Mindset

Teaching my curriculum and meeting our defined outcomes is always at the forefront of my mind as a teacher. To meet those outcomes, I have always chosen between various methods, techniques and hands-on materials for each lesson that I teach. Once I began connecting my classroom, I had one more dimension to consider as I planned. How could connecting with another person or class help my students to learn this?



I don't always choose to use technology. I don't want to leave you with the impression that we are having daily Skype calls or that we have some kind of blog posting quota. We are not spending our whole day connecting with other classrooms and individuals. *Connecting for the sake of connecting does not make any sense.* That would not advance my students' learning. Some days go by without any kind of connection with the world outside of our classroom. But I am always looking for times and ways that connecting *will* make the learning better in some way.

If you are just beginning to consider connection as part of your regular teaching and learning experience, try thinking about how you could enhance just one lesson by connecting to the online world. Perhaps it would be having a guest speaker (such as an [author](#)) to skype with your students—someone who would be unable to come to your class in person. Or you might begin by putting some of your learning about forces or animals or another topic into a Google document that you share with another class so students can compare the learning. Maybe you are ready to start a blog about your classroom, but not quite ready for all of the students to have their own blogs as well. Begin with what feels most comfortable for you. Take a first step. I think you'll want to take another.

## It IS about Flexibility

In any connected classroom, flexibility is paramount. One morning, as I was in my classroom getting ready for the start of my school day, I heard the familiar chirp of a Skype chat message on my computer. When I checked, there was a request from a friend in New Hampshire.



Sheila Adams

Hi Mrs. Cassidy - My students have some Moon rock samples on loan from NASA in our classroom. I was thinking this may be a good opportunity for my kids to learn to skype. If you have some time and want to ask us some questions or "see" them . . . skype in! We have them until tomorrow. If I don't answer, we are at lunch or something. Again, we are learning . . .

What a fabulous opportunity for my classroom! Of course I wanted them to have a chance to see the moon rock samples. We arranged for a time after my students arrived at school. My first graders listened and watched with rapt attention as her 12



year olds carefully explained what they had learned about the moon and showed us the rocks that NASA had trusted to their care. They also showed us a model of the rocket that had taken the first men to the moon and demonstrated how various parts of it were used at different times. Then they patiently answered lots of questions. It was a highlight of our school year.

That unexpected and richly rewarding Skype call with [Sheila Adams](#)' class was able to happen because I was willing to ditch my routine that morning. If I had deferred to the next day, there would have been no moon rocks experience for my students to remember and treasure.

Although my classroom is presently one to one with iPads, we have not always been. Sometimes we have had five computers in our classroom, sometimes two, and sometimes we have only had access through our weekly time in the computer lab. Whatever the situation, we have taken turns or worked in groups and made connecting work for our classroom because it is so valuable. Whatever your situation, you can make it work for you as well.

## It IS about Being a Learner Yourself

Many teachers tell me that they are just not interested in using technology in their classroom. Often, this is because they do not feel comfortable using the technology themselves. It seems disingenuous to ask our students to learn things that are challenging for them if we are not willing to model being a learner ourselves.

I understand (very well!) that it can feel unsettling to not know how to do something. Our students feel that every time we teach them a new concept. Most teachers like to be in control, and we do not feel in control if we are trying something new and complicated like a web tool or a tablet computer. But our kids need us to give up some of that impulse to control. By being willing to try new things in front of the children, to make mistakes, we exemplify the learner attitude we want our students to have.

When we began working with [Nintendo DS](#) in my classroom, my students were (and still are!) light years ahead of me in their knowledge and skill. They taught and re-taught me many things about using that gaming system.





When we first got our iPads, we were learning how to share what was on our devices using Apple TV. I had shown the students the only way that I knew to make that happen, but Tucker confidently told me that you could also access it in another way. He did not have access to an iPad at home, and he had never used one before. He simply saw and recognized the Apple TV symbol on the screen and knew something about that piece of the puzzle. I love learning from my students in this way, and they certainly enjoy being the teachers.



Some teachers do not use technology to connect because they don't feel they have enough access. They tell me that if they had more access they would consider using it. I would like to have even more books in my classroom, but I don't stop teaching reading just because I don't have all the books I want. I make it work, just as every other teacher has always done. Reading is too important.

And I believe giving our students access to the world outside their classroom is too important to ignore as well. No matter what or how much technology you or I have, we owe it to our students to learn how to use that technology—and to use it in ways that do not just replicate what they could do on a worksheet but help them join the connected world of learning.



Teachers have also told me that they just don't feel young children should be using technology at all. To those teachers I say, "They already are!" Our primary students are learning and applying technology of many kinds in their lives outside of our classrooms. Children are all familiar with their parents' cell phones. And while all parents have not purchased tablets or mobile devices for their kids, every child seems to have some type of interactive device for games and learning.

By keeping technology out of our classroom, we are, in effect, asking them to power down when they come to school. I do not want my students to feel that school is different than their "real" lives. I want them to be able to learn in the classroom the way they like to learn outside of the classroom.

I have read that these same protests happened in earlier centuries when some schools first began to use pen and paper. There were those who felt that using slates with chalk should be good enough. Slates had always worked in the past and students did not need to have some new-fangled technology. In the very near future, our resistance to using technology to engage and connect will seem just as silly. The world changes. We teachers need to learn and change along with it.

## Places to Get Started

Sometimes teachers need a little help as they set out on the road to connecting. There are some people and groups that feel so strongly about the importance of connecting classrooms that they have designed projects solely to help teachers take the first steps.

I have seen many projects come and go, but the following people and organizations have sustained their efforts long enough that I feel confident in recommending them.

- [\*Projects by Jen\*](#)– From exchanging holiday cards to counting the seeds in a pumpkin to [\*graphing the treats\*](#) in a box of Lucky Charms, there is always something fun and educational happening on Jen's website. Once you register for one of her projects, she gives you access to the other teachers involved and you can contact them to chat on Skype. Through one of Jen Wagner's projects, my class checked to see [\*how high we could stack Oreos\*](#), and then chatted with two other first grade classes to see how they



had done. We compared our highest and lowest stacks as well as the class average. While we chatted, we also took time to ask some of those weighty six-year-old questions like do you get snow there and what does your playground look like? It was connected learning from and with children from far away.

- *Flat Classroom*– Julie Lindsay and Vicki Davis have recently expanded their Flat Classroom age groups to include a K-2 project. This project is a bigger time commitment and requires more work on the part of the classroom teacher, but ends with a project that has been co-created with classrooms from around the world. When we participated, a class of kindergarten students in China captivated my students' interest and hearts. (There is a subscription fee for participating in this project.)
- *ePals*– This learning community has members from over 200 countries. You can join someone's project or start your own and ask others to join. Since individual teachers set up the projects, there is wide variety in collaboration expectations. Simply sign up for an account to access all of their options.

## You Can Do It

You really can do this. You can connect your classroom and start your students on the road to lifelong, global learning. Many thousands of teachers already have, and more are making the choice each year.

It's easy to be intimidated by all the possibilities that being online can provide. It's tempting to look at all of the digital artifacts and ideas that I have mentioned and to say, "I couldn't possibly do that." It would be overwhelming, to say the least, to start from never having done any kind of virtual collaboration and jump right into all of the things I have described.

I always suggest that people begin with just one thing. Pick one idea that sounds interesting and might be something you'd be willing to incorporate into your classroom. Perhaps you see the potential of a blog to connect your students with the world and want to try that. Maybe you think that Twitter would be a great way to communicate with parents and other classrooms. Possibly the idea of using Skype, with its live video capability,



appeals to you. Maybe one of the other options in this book has piqued your interest. Pick something. Create a connection. Get started with that tool and see where it takes you and your class.

When I first started blogging with my students, I did only that—I just blogged. Truthfully, that blog was not very interesting. I felt a compulsion to blog every day, and some days there was not much of interest to write about. I wrote anyway. That was a mistake.

My first blog posts never contained any artifacts besides the text of the article. I did not post pictures, videos, podcasts or any other digital items that might have made my blog more appealing. I didn't do it because I just didn't know how. For many months, my readers were stuck looking at only black text. I just muddled through as best as I could. People kindly read it anyway.

Gradually, I learned how to do things. One day, I learned how to add pictures to my posts, and they became more visually interesting. Much later, I learned how to upload a video online and how to get the embed code from that video so that it would display on my blog. Along the way I learned how to podcast. I learned how to use Skype, to use Twitter and many other online tools. And I am still learning, every day. It's a series of baby steps.

## Bigger Baby Steps

But here's the best news: You can take bigger baby steps than I did! Connecting gets easier all the time. Each day new tools are put online to help people get connected. The tools available now make connecting so much easier than when I first began. Many of them are very similar to using a word processing program on your computer. Capturing images of your students and their work, adding audio and visual media to your classroom home on the Internet—it's becoming as easy as using a word processor or PowerPoint or the apps on your phone.

In times gone by, there were not many contexts that would allow five- and six- and seven-year olds to perceive some of the world's tremendous diversity. We have the means to give them that awareness now, and it is a perspective I want for my students. I want them to be global learners, pursuing topics of



shared interest and learning with and about children from afar. I can only imagine how much better off our world might be if most of our children grew up in this connected way.

My guess is that you want this for your students, too. Starting by doing everything that I have mentioned in this book is not necessary. Start with just one small step.

## What will your step be?

