

Chapter 1 – ClassPortals in Action

Here is a small sample of how a ClassPortal might look in action. These fictional vignettes present a range of age levels and content areas and are designed to excite your imaginations about what aspects appeal to you. The main criteria for what makes a “ClassPortal” will follow, but the concept is intentionally flexible so that individual teachers and classes can evolve their portal to best support learning that is both joyous and rigorous.

Example Scenario 1: What’s Hot & What’s Not

Mr. George knew his Year Six students were experts on the latest computer animated movies. He heard them buzz on Fridays about what show they planned to see and then caught snippets on Monday as they traded 12-year-old opinions about what they’d seen. As a teacher, he appreciated their enthusiasm, but knew he could leverage this excitement to help them dig a little deeper into why they liked what they did and to understand a little more about what he often saw as classic good-versus-bad heroic tales.

Mr. George took an idea to his school’s resident ICT expert and together they built a simple Weblog that allowed Mr. George to embed movie trailers that he projected from his laptop to the classroom screen. He wanted the students to come up with qualities they thought made a good movie, so he took some time to let students “shoot from the hip” and express their opinions without asking them to justify themselves. As he managed the discussion, allowing each person to have their say, Mr. George noted recurring themes and silently listed them on the board: “good plot,” “lots of action,” “funny characters,” “cool graphics,” “a story with a good ending.” Before long, Mr. George had the class select what they thought were the six most important qualities that made up a great movie. Over the course of the year, each student would have to complete one final draft movie review for publication on their Weblog. The students had to include each of the six “great movie” criteria, but could rank them in whatever order they felt was most important. Class discussions helped students refine their arguments and Mr. George was more than happy to make “evaluation” a main text type, knowing that

regular practice in this approach would become a critical thinking tool students could use throughout their secondary years and adulthood.

A little way into the year, a couple of the more techy students brought in podcasts they had downloaded from professional movie reviewers. When the class listened to the podcasts, they saw merit in the critiques, but thought these adults missed some important things that they, as children – the movie’s intended audience – understood differently. Mr. George had heard about podcasts and was keen to learn more, so he found out from other teachers’ Websites how to download free software and install it on his laptop. Beyond that, he only had a general knowledge of the recording and posting process, but his little group of tech experts in the class were happy to take on the role of producing audio recordings of their peers’ movie reviews. The students’ enthusiasm and achievements in thinking and writing were so rewarding that Mr. George carried on the approach the next few years so that now if someone searches the Web for “movie reviews” and “computer animated,” Mr. George’s students’ blog comes up as one of the first five sites on the Internet.

Guess what? This could be you!

Example Scenario 2: “Destined to repeat them”

Mrs. Craig’s Year Eleven Modern European History classes love to debate current events. These very bright students had a lot of great ideas, insights and arguments, but Mrs. Craig was frustrated that the debates “never seemed to end – never really *got* anywhere.” She noticed that more than once students referred to Casteneda’s quote that those who don’t understand the events of history are destined to repeat them. (check quote & author) Because the students also need to continuously review what they know about history in preparation for their year twelve exam, she struck on an idea to use as a ClassPortal. Small groups of students could specialise in particular eras and events in Modern European History and continuously look for parallels in current events. As specialists, they would then go beyond obvious similarities to question more deeply compare and contrast the events from different times and perhaps even cultures and peoples. Could the US learn from the waning of the British Empire? Could China learn from the French or Russian Revolutions?

Mrs. Craig had heard of these things called RSS Feeds and got a bit of help from her daughter at university to set up a Webpage that gathered together all the latest news from around the world. The Guardian, Al Jazeera, The New York Times, BBC, CNN and the ABC Web sites all offered news feeds that sent their latest articles on world events directly to this page for Mrs. Craig's students who then skimmed the headlines and article leads to see whether any might apply to their analyses. When they came across something that seemed to resonate with their topic, they "made a post" on the ClassPortal. All students were invited to comment on the post and over time opinions formed around two main themes: first, were these two events – one from the past and one making contemporary news – really more similar or more different. Second, if the events were similar, is it true that the present could learn from the past to the extent that past tragedies could be avoided, or was it such that each era is distinct to itself and that history never, in fact, repeats, but offers up permutations and reinterpretations of how to respond to current events and issues?

Mrs. Craig found that instead of simply tossing around clever insights, her students were developing a deeper sophistication and understanding. Finally, she thought, here was the subtlety of interpretation that makes for true historians.

Know what? This could be your class!

Example Scenario 3: Not Scared of Big Numbers

Ms. Armstrong observed that students in her Year One – Two composite class repeated a pattern she had witnessed many times over her career. Younger students did well to count to ten, then all the way up to one hundred. After this they mastered the idea that you just keep going until you get to "thousands." After that, however, it all got mushy as bigger numbers merged into a blob of "million-billion-trillion-zillion-gazillion," all of which essentially translated as "really, *really* big numbers." Ms. Armstrong had seen a few Web sites that did a great job of graphically representing some really big numbers. One showed the national budget as stacks of currency compared to people, cars and skyscrapers. Another depicted evolutionary time as one hour, highlighting the brevity of human existence compared to the ages of the dinosaurs and simpler life forms. Besides "amounts" and "time," she knew that "distance" was another concept that rapidly escalated from "here" and "over there" to "around the world" and "across the universe."

She thought it would be fun and educational to collect as many great Web sites as she could that help us understand how much, how long or how far really big numbers are. Then every once in a while – when the students were particularly excited by the idea – they could figure out their own way to demonstrate a different big number. For example, when she taught upper primary, she found the students got a better grasp of the Solar System when they spaced themselves out in groups on the playground, matching their distances as planets and moons standing at scaled distances from each other. So she got her Year One/Two students to paint pictures of the planets on butcher paper and then paced out their locations in the playground. She then used the school's digital camera to take pictures of the students and their paintings and later even downloaded an aerial image of the school from Google Maps so she could place dots on where the students had stood. She printed this out and posted it along with the students' photos on the bulletin board. Another teacher saw this and suggested it would make a fun posting to the ClassPortal.

After a quick session with this Year Six teacher who already had a ClassPortal (“Tracking Natural Disasters”), Ms. Armstrong had a Weblog and a half dozen links to great online demonstrations of size. She also subscribed to free RSS feeds from sites like National Geographic, NOVA and Discovery in case they posted any new features related to time, space or distance. She also searched through databases like Filamentality that teachers use to make their own hotlists of great sites. As a special writing assignment she did post the Google map of the school and the students paintings online and asked parents to comment on what they learned or with questions they had. The students were excited to see their pictures connected to the big playground demonstration and to know that people outside the school could see what they were learning.

Ms. Armstrong was proud of this group of students who all had clearer mental pictures that didn't have Nanny riding dinosaurs or themselves setting up a space colony in the next galaxy. Not bad for six and seven year olds!

Does this get you thinking? What else could excite deeper student learning?

Possible Topics Related to Curriculum Content

Science

- Wild Weather
- Frogs Galore
- Amazing Marsupials
- This Desert Life
- What about Rainforests?
- Dinosaurs with a difference
- The World of Whales
- Pollution Matters
- Simple Machines
- Starry, starry night
- Rockhounds and Crystals Club
- The March of Technology

Mathematics

- Why do I need to learn this?
- Geometry in Action
- Exponential Growth
- How Big is that?
- Patterns in Nature

Geography & cultures

- Egypt: then & now
- Rivers of the World
- Why do they live like that?
- What good is religion?
- The Wonders of the World
- Peak experiences: Mountains

History

- The War to End all Wars
- A Civil War?
- It's all Greek to me
- How long ago was that?

History, continued

- Fertile / Futile / Feudal Crescent
- The Space Race
- The Rise and Fall of Rome
- Lighting up the Dark Ages
- The Ancient world today

English

- The Lost Generation
- Fantasy fiction
- Science Fiction?
- Shakespeare's the Greatest
- Propping up Propaganda
- Haiku and other short poems
- Persuade me!
- That's debatable
- Quotable comments
- Bumperstickers & sound bites
- Authors we Love

Physical Education & Health

- The Obesity Epidemic
- The Truth about Nutrition
- What is Fit?
- The perfect diet
- Testing the Limits
- Extreme Sports

Languages

- C'est la Vie!
- Latin Lovers
- Deutschland
- Spanglish
- It's Idiomatic

Possible Topics Related to Student and Teacher Interests

Hobbies & Personal Interests

- Fishing, Fish, Aquariums
- Camping & hiking & Birding
- Collecting: cards, stamps, coins

Popular Culture

- Extreme sports
- Harry Potter
- Hip hop & Pop music

- Pokémon, Yu-gi-oh, etc.
- Horses, dogs, cats & pets
- All sorts of sports
- Quilting, Weaving & tapestries
- Woodworking
- Pottery & painting
- Claymation & Photography
- Travel
- Remote control Cars & Planes
- Warhammer, Bratz & new toys
- Genealogy
- “Dumpster Diving”

- Cinema Hits
- What’s in the News?
- Their 15 minutes of Fame
- Study of Celebrity
- Hi Tech gadgets
- Lay the slang on me
- Critiquing cartoons
- Star Wars
- Computer Gaming
- Tweeny & Teen cultures
- Comic Books
- Censorship vs Good Taste

World Issues

- Globalization
- World Poverty
- Child Soldiers
- World Hotspots
- Tracking the Truth
- Who’s in Charge Here?
- Economics Watch
- Human Rights

- Animal Rights
- Genetically Modified Foods
- Stem Cell Research & Cloning
- Immigration & Population
- Global Warming & its impact
- The Truth about Racism
- Energy Sources & Sustainability
- Whale research & hunting

Brainstorm your Possibilities

Ideas within the curriculum

Ideas from Personal Interests

Ideas from Students’ Passions