

Logging In: Connecting with Secondary Students Online



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It's Monday morning. Thankful to have survived rush hour and my teething six-month-old's drop-off with the babysitter, I'm ready to start the workday. Fifteen minutes before my first class, I pour my cup of coffee in the kitchen and think through my outline of the day's classes. The Harlem Renaissance and Louis Armstrong at 9 a.m. Comedic devices with a heavy focus on satire at 11 a.m. Showing vs. telling in creative writing at 1 p.m. State assessment reading preparation at 3 p.m.

I walk down the hallway to my classroom. One desk, one chair, one laptop. One silent home office—soon to be the place where I connect with more than 100 very lively students throughout the day.

When I tell people that I teach high school English online, the number-one question I am most often asked is, "Don't you miss the daily face-to-face interaction with your students?" If I could only invite them into my home office, where there is nonstop student interaction, perhaps they would understand.

I plug in my laptop and headset and log into my virtual classroom. Students meet each week for synchronous live sessions with teachers and classmates. Like many traditional classrooms, my virtual classroom has a whiteboard. However, I no longer have to keep track of those elusive dry-erase markers or worry about students who can't see the board. In this virtual space, all students are able to turn on their microphones and webcams, post pictures, type in the chat, and interact on the whiteboard. Yes, the virtual classroom has the potential to be cacophonous, but with thoughtful planning and creativity, teachers can transform Internet-based chaos into a highly engaging and authentic community of learning.

As I turn on my microphone, five students eagerly awaiting class type their hellos. More stu-

dents log in, and I ask about their weekends while I load my presentation for the lesson. One student uses her mic to tell me about her new job and her goal of buying a car by the end of the semester. Another student wants to show us pictures of his birthday party—he is quick to identify his parents and younger brother, who all happen to be eating breakfast in the background while he chats with us. All the students wish him a happy birthday, and many request that I sing the Happy Birthday song aloud. Apologizing for my lacking singing talent, I sing for my students, and one *American Idol* hopeful joins in. A very bright student logs in at 8:58 a.m., and she requests help with one of the last assignments of the semester. It's barely March, yet this student has taken advantage of the ability to work ahead at her own pace. Just as I start the recording for the students who were unable to attend the class, I notice two students typing in the chat to each other, sharing excitement about meeting at prom. I focus the students on the objectives for the lesson, and class begins.

Online Students/Online Classrooms

My students are scattered across the state, but in our virtual classroom we are united in one place with a common goal. The students' reasons for attending school online are as diverse as the students themselves: gifted students seeking AP courses not offered in their local districts; students who have dropped out after becoming pregnant; working students who have to help support their families in these tough economic times. One student is a professional dancer, attending online classes while on the road pursuing her dream. Another student dropped



Jane M. McManus teaching in her virtual classroom.

out after being bullied by his classmates. There are students who are caring for their sick parents and students caring for their newborns. Several have been disengaged from their traditional high school, but all the students have one goal in common: the dream of earning their high school diploma.

Like many teachers, on chaotic days I remind myself that what I do has meaning. Nearly one third of all public high school students drop out before graduation (Swanson). With online programs growing across the nation, virtual teachers are continually working to reengage students. Online learning has the potential to reach a diverse group of students and offer them equal access to learning.


I believe in the transformative power of education. However, we know that students do not have equitable educational experiences in traditional schools. More than 40 percent of high schools do not offer any AP courses, and most of that 40 percent predominantly enroll low-income students (“Expanding”). There is a distinct challenge facing committed educators who desire to transform our society but who are faced with school systems that remain part of the problem instead of inspiring solutions.

It has been more than 160 years since Horace Mann expressed that “education . . . beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of

conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery” (qtd. in Cremin 65). However, education has not been able to equalize the segments of our society where social injustices and inequalities in education sabotage well-meaning efforts. Education has the potential to be transformative in people’s lives, but before this can happen effectively and equitably, educational approaches themselves must be transformed.

Reengaging Students

Accepting the disengagement of students from traditional school systems is not an option. The high school dropout rate is not merely a disheartening statistic. It is a startling wake-up call that something is not working in our schools. Online learning has the potential to reach students with a personalized education. This generation of students has only known a world with the Internet, social media, and instant communication. Why not use these tools to reengage students and promote a merging of digital literacies with traditional school curricula?

I am energized by the possibilities of online education. While the curricular content closely resembles traditional school content, the delivery is fresh and innovative. At times it feels as if we are pioneers, cutting our own path as online educators. Regardless of age and experience, we are all in our early years of online teaching, leading this technology “trend” in education. I can no longer say it is the wave of the future, as I am living it. Online teaching and learning is here, and I am honored to be a part of it. 

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