



OCTOBER 25, 2012, 2:00 PM

Guest Post | Three Starting Points for Thinking Differently About Learning

By [WILL RICHARDSON](#)

Video describing a digital history textbook created by students, a project begun in two Ohio middle schools, but continued "with help from others around the globe." [Go to related wiki](#) »

If you're an educator who is interested in technology, we're pretty sure you've come across the [work of Will Richardson](#) at some point in the last five years.

The first edition of his "[Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms](#)" was the first tech-specific education book I read in 2006 when, fresh out of the classroom, I took the job as editor of this site - back when I barely knew the keyboard shortcuts for "cut" and "paste," much less how blogs, wikis and podcasts could change learning.

Mr. Richardson has a [new book](#) out, and its themes echo so much of what we try to do on The Learning Network that we asked him to write a guest post. Tell us your thoughts, below. -
-Katherine Schulten

Three Starting Points for Thinking Differently About Learning

By Will Richardson

When I was a classroom teacher just over a decade ago, just when the Web was starting to become inherently social and participatory, I had a feeling it was going to change things in a big way.

I could see it in the ways my high school students were blogging and connecting with authors and professionals and other students from around the world. (The Times even [made note of it.](#))

I could see it on [my own blog](#), where suddenly I was learning with really smart people whom I had never met face to face, people who quickly became a part of a network of educator-learners to whom I felt deeply connected. It was exciting and fascinating and somewhat daunting all at once.

Today, there is no doubt that the Web has changed things more than most of us could have imagined way back there at the turn of the century. Every day we have access to more information, more knowledge and more people. In many ways, I can't imagine there has been a more amazing time to learn.

I also, however, can't imagine a more challenging time for schools.

The last 15 Web-frenzied years have upended the basic premise of school. The idea that content and knowledge and teachers are scarce and have to be collected into a local classroom during a certain time period in order to educate our children is no longer true.

Those things are now abundant for most of us, and for the 95 percent of our 12- to 17-year-old students who carry the collected knowledge of the Web around in their pockets. The fact that our students can access most of the traditional school curriculum without us requires us to rethink almost everything about our role as teachers and our value in schools. [Khan Academy](#) is just the beginning.

Over the next couple of decades, schools, like media, music, business, politics and other industries grappling with similar disruptions, will have to change.

As one of my favorite authors, [Clay Shirky](#), has observed, "The change we are in the middle of isn't minor and it isn't optional." But, as Mr. Shirky also notes, the contours of that change are not "set in stone." [None of us can be sure exactly what schools or classrooms will become](#), although as educators it is imperative we all add our voices to the discussion.

So what can we be sure of? Well, we can be sure that abundance brings a host of opportunities for learning, and we can be sure that if we are going to make sense of those opportunities in ways that benefit our students, we're going to have to unlearn and relearn much of our own practice.

In short, it has to start with a willingness to reflect on what the larger changes mean in our own learning.

To that end, I would like to suggest three starting points for thinking differently about our roles as "connected educators" and about the classrooms we inhabit at this moment of profound shift.

1. Thin the Walls of Your Classroom

One of my favorite connected educators, [Clarence Fisher](#) in Snow Lake, Manitoba, has been blogging for years about how the Web has given his classroom "thin walls."

Via the Internet, his students have gone beyond the cinder-block walls of their building to discuss books and collaborate on projects with classrooms in the United States and South America and across Canada. Mr. Fisher serves as a connector for his students, taking advantage of the Web to bring learning into his classroom in ways that didn't exist when many of those students were born.

Tens of thousands of educators are doing this now. Using tools like Skype, Google hangouts, Google docs and more, they are taking advantage of all of the experts and professionals and

artists and other passionate learners who are out there online to inform and educate.

In 2010, The Times's Bits blog asked teachers how the use of technology was changing how they teach, then [showcased eight video answers to that question](#). Click on the image below to see them:

As these teachers show, thin-walled classrooms are about more than simply connecting. They are also about creating and sharing real work for real audiences.

It is not about doing work that hangs on bulletin boards or hallway walls; it is about sending work out into the world - like the writing and videos of [Kathy Cassidy's first graders](#) in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, where students post on their own blogs and get comments from their global audience.

[Here](#) is Ms. Cassidy's class in a Halloween-themed video:

It's about work like the [Digital History Textbook](#) that the Ohio teachers Garth Holman and Mike Pennington are creating on their class wiki ... with the help of other classrooms all over the place.

But thin walls can also apply to assessments. If we see our classrooms as nodes in a much bigger network of learners, [why wouldn't we allow students to answer the questions we ask of them using those networks as well](#)? Why should schools remain the only place where our young people can't take the access they are carrying around in their pockets and use it to complete the test? Don't we want to know that our students can use this access safely, effectively and ethically?

2. Talk to Strangers

Learning today is not just about connecting your students to other classrooms or experts that you find; it is about teaching them to make their own connections as well. And that means teaching them how to find, vet and learn with people they don't know, people whom they may never meet face to face. In fact, I would argue that is an essential part of being literate at this moment of abundance.

As a parent, I want my own teenagers to be able to take advantage of the same types of powerful learning opportunities that I've had in online networks and communities over the last decade. By looking online for others who share the same passions, I've come to know educators from across the United States, Australia, China, Norway, Brazil, Canada and elsewhere who are also trying to sort out how technologies can change our thinking about teaching and learning.

It is not necessarily difficult to make these types of connections, nor is it inherently risky. In fact, research has shown that the [safety issues that we hear about on the Web are in many cases](#)

overblown. But that is not to say our students wouldn't be best served by a little help from us. Assuming, of course, that we ourselves are connecting with strangers.

The best place to start? I would have to say [Twitter](#) at this point.

While it may seem at times that Twitter is the Wild West of nonsense and thoughtlessness, it can be almost the exact opposite if you know where to look. (You might start with this [free guide to Twitter](#) from Powerful Learning Practice, of which I'm a co-founder, or read about how [these teachers use Twitter for their own professional development](#). You might also follow the many educators suggested by a [Learning Network post for Connected Educator Month](#).)

The key to Twitter is simple: it's who you follow. I have the benefit of about 175 really smart, passionate educators and others (like [@joe_bower](#) and [@edutopia](#) and [@patrickmlarkin](#)) who filter and curate the world for me daily by sharing links and ideas that I normally wouldn't come by.

Being able to connect and learn with strangers is an important skill for all of us, and especially for a generation that will be learning online for the rest of their lives.

3. Be Transparent

We need to model the types of skills and dispositions that our students will need in order to take advantage of all of the abundance at their fingertips.

That includes going out and connecting with others, but it also means sharing our own work, learning transparently and actively participating in online spaces where our students can find us. I know that is a difficult proposition for many who may feel uncomfortable putting their work out there for the world or their students to see. But the returns can be profound.

The first return is that our students get to see how this Web-learning thing is done well. When they can see their teacher (like [Shelley Wright](#)) or their principal (like [Chris Lehmann](#)) connecting and creating and learning with the world, they gain a much better sense of the possibilities for themselves.

Here are recent Twitter messages from these educators:

For folks who asked for my slides from the weekend: ISTE Leadership Forum
Keynote on @slideshare <http://t.co/1dBjNTL6>

- [Chris Lehmann \(@chrislehmann\)](#) 23 Oct 12

Looking for an elementary class in Australia to partner with my daughters' grade 3 class.

- [Shelley Wright \(@wrightsroom\)](#) 2 Oct 12

Second, if you are sharing your work and ideas online, you develop that very necessary lens for bringing the Web to your classroom in safe, effective and ethical ways. In this new world of abundance, our students will have to be adept at knowing what and what not to share.

They will have to manage their reputations online. And they will have to become [Googled well](#). The reality is that every child in your classroom is going to be Googled over and over and over again in his or her life, by [potential employers](#), college admissions officers and potential mates.

I actually think we should make it an expressed outcome from high school that all of our students are Googled well, under their full name, on graduation day. I mean, why wouldn't we want to know that they are prepared?

Finally, while finding strangers is an important part of lifelong learning these days, it is even better to be found *by* strangers online. I know: sounds weird. But give it time. The only way for people who share your interests and passions and experiences to find you is if you are "findable." That won't happen if you're not participating online.

It is a different time for teaching and learning. The unfortunate reality is that much of what we do in schools and in our own teaching practice is still grounded in thinking that has ruled the day for more than a century.

More troubling is that the waves of reform that are spreading are more focused on just doing what we've been doing better rather than rethinking our roles as schools and teachers and doing things differently. If our focus remains on numbers and scores and rankings and assessments, our kids are not going to get the learning outcomes they need for this new era of information and knowledge.

The good news? All of us can begin that change process in our own practice today. And if we do, our opportunities to learn deeply and passionately will only grow.

Related: The Learning Network's "[Resources | Teaching With and About Technology](#)."