"Not Just a Poster on the Wall:" Weaving Together Technology and Middle Grades Philosophy

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Map of the Presentation

- Costs and sources of disengagement
- Imperative to effectively integrate technology into teaching and learning
- One team's experience with technology and middle grades philosophy
- Lessons learned about technology integration
- Suggestions for the way forward

Problem: The Costs of Disengagement

- In the U.S., nearly half of all public high schoolers in the 50 largest cities fail to graduate

- The national graduation rate is merely 70%

- 1.2 million new public school dropouts every year (Swanson, 2008)

Problem: The Costs of Dropouts

- Dropouts tend to be less healthy and more likely to be early parents, receiving welfare (Amos, 2008), and in prison (Christle et al., 2005)

- Dropouts result in lost potential, lower revenues, higher social spending, and weakened competitiveness

- The dropouts from cohort 2008 would have added $319 billion to the U.S. economy over their lifetimes had they graduated (Amos, 2008)

- Increasing HS graduation and college matriculation of males by 5% leads to savings of almost $8 billion each year

Dropouts and the Middle Grades

- Signs of dropout risk emerge clearly in the middle grades: academic failure, poor behavior, absenteeism (Balfanz et al., 2007)

- Suggests a poor "fit" between these students' developmental needs and their schooling experience (Eccles et al., 1993)

- Increasing focus on middle grades to identify disengaged students and intervene

The imperative to get technology integration right

- Poorly implemented technology integration is not only unlikely to benefit learners but, through its opportunity costs, detracts from proven, less expensive, and more readily applied education reforms (e.g., Cuban, 2003)

- It is therefore vital to examine research in technology integration through the same lens of middle level philosophy that is often applied to other middle grades reform initiatives.

The imperative to get technology integration right

- "Today's youth may be coming of age and struggling for autonomy and identity as did their predecessors, but they are doing so amid new worlds for communication, friendship, play, and self-expression" (Ito et al., 2008, p. 1).

- Technology has dramatically altered how adolescents experience their social world, and their in-school technology use appears to be contributing to "a widening gap between children's everyday 'life worlds' outside of school and the emphases of many educational systems" (Buckingham, 2007, p. 96).

- As Gee suggested, "Is it any wonder, then, that by high school, very often both good students and bad ones, rich ones and poor ones, don't much like school?" (2007, p.5).

Our Approach

- To use the <u>core principles of middle grades philosophy</u> to guide intensive technology integration.

The I-Leap Project

The Engagers Team

- Four-year initiative with a new site starting
- Heterogeneous grades 7 and 8 partner team
- Technology-rich, integrative, project-based, community-oriented Hardware: 1:1 wireless laptops, digital video, audio and media tools, whiteboards
- Designed with re-engagement in mind

Engagers Philosophy and Pedagogy

- "I really wanted kids to be doing projects that they cared about, make them feel that they're a part of something, to give them a sense of belonging..., their opinions respected, their voices being heard … feeling like they have a say in what they're doing." *(Sarah, the lead teacher for the Engagers Team).*

- "The authentic piece: [that] the information is real to them, it's relevant to their lives. It's real, it's happening, it's out there; it's things that … ultimately may lead back to student engagement." *(Mike, special educator).*

Engagers Pedagogy

	Project-Based Learning	Community Connections	Authentic Audience	Technology Integration
Year One Projects				
"Our Town" Digital Stories and Videos	x	x		x
"Our Town in the 1930s and 1940s" Community Interviews, Digital Stories, and Videos	x	x	x	x
Teens' Questions Podcast	x	x	x	x
Current Events, Team Life, and Writing Blogs		x	x	x

Team Work!

Milton Historical Society

"Veterans Project" Presentation

# Fieldtrip To Vermont Public Radio

Podcasting at The Alley

Student Sample

Engagers' Project-Based Learning

- Student: "I like the hands on, doing the projects, because …like the whole podcasting thing that we did? I mean a trip to [the local public radio station] and **actually creating the podcast itself and when you got to research your own topic. That made it more interesting for me**." *(Courtney)*
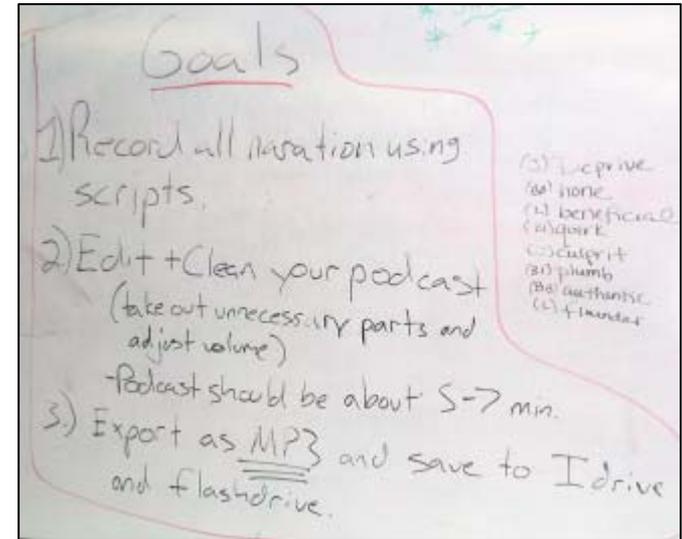
Engagers' Authentic Audience

- Student: "When we actually put it out to the community, it's kind of like it's going somewhere, there's an actual point to it." *(Tony)*

- Student: "Usually in class, you know, you do a project and you throw it in the trash the next day because you're just there to get the grade and then be done with it." *(Eric)*

- Student: "You know that you can't make a complete idiot out of yourself – I mean they hear it and that's what they're going to think about you. It is [a lot of pressure] but it's good pressure." *(Elliot)*

What Mattered for Success

- "Having the philosophy there and grounding me made me do it…. Telling them that we're going to do it differently and then having to live up to that, has definitely pushed me too." *(Sarah)*

"Fit" revisited: The in-school and out-of-school technology lives of young adolescents

- Teacher: "**Everything we've done we could have done without computers**. There was no reason why we couldn't have gone out there with old tape recorders, taped people, and done the same thing." *(Sarah)*

- Teacher: **Good teaching doesn't need technology**. It's just a tool there to help." *(Mike)*

- Buckingham (2007) describes "a widening gap between children's everyday 'life worlds' outside of school and the emphases of many educational systems" (p. 96).

- Student: "I mean Engagers has like um, I don't know, like steel and iron and all that stuff and the [rest of the] school has all grass, crayons and rocks." *(Jenna)*

"Fit" revisited: The in-school and out-of-school technology lives of young adolescents

- Student: "I thought it was kind of unfair because **taking away the computer for Engagers is kind of like taking away pencils and textbooks and everything.** Or taking away your backpack for regular team. ... And like that was a huge technology week when we had to do a whole bunch of stuff. We had three projects that week." *(Anita)*

Emerging media:
New roles, new opportunities

- Friendship-driven AND interest-driven use: Hanging out and geeking out

- Creating new opportunities for youth to grapple with social norms, explore interests, develop technical skills, and experiment with new forms of self-expression.

- In many respects erases the traditional markers of status and authority.

- By its immediacy and breadth of information, the digital world lowers barriers to self-directed learning.

Implications for teaching and learning

- Adults should facilitate young people's engagement with digital media.

- Given the diversity of digital media, it is problematic to develop a standardized set of benchmarks against which to measure young people's technical and new media literacy.

- Adults have an important role to play, particularly in interest-driven participation in new media.

- To stay relevant in the 21st century, education institutions need to keep pace with the rapid changes introduced by digital media.

Implications for teaching and learning

- "Rather than seeing socializing and play as hostile to learning, educational programs could be positioned to step in and support moments when youth are motivated to move from friendship-driven to more interest-driven forms of new media use" (Ip. 35).

- Middle schools must be a buffer against the injustices of poverty and other forces that still deny too many young adolescents full access to their own generation's experience with a technological world.

Re-Examining Technology Integration through a Middle Level Lens

- How might our current work with technology be informed by lessons learned about young adolescence, technology, and middle grades philosophy?

Discussion:
Work of Value and Personal Meaning

- "If educators want students to work hard and be persistent, they must find ways of designing work that students believe to be worth doing" (Schlechty, 2001, p. 10), because it is perceived to be of value and personal meaning (p. 64).

- "Engagement does not result from students' desire to learn. **Engagement results from students' desire to do things they cannot do *unless* they learn"** (p. 9).

- "To assess engagement it is necessary to determine both the level of effort a student is expending and the meaning and significance the student attaches to the tasks he or she is assigned" (p. 68).

Conclusions:
Engagement, Technology, and Middle Grades Philosophy

- Couple technology with a pedagogy rich in relevance, authenticity, and purpose.

- Examine technology-rich innovations through the lens of middle level philosophy.

- Integrate our philosophical insights into the "technological pedagogical content knowledge" we aspire to (www.tpck.org).

- Forge ahead with technology integration to address the widening in-school/out-of-school culture gap.

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