The online classroom

Social networking can bring the whole world within reach of your pupils, says Bev Humphrey...

"Beverley...Beverley...I just asked you a question. Pay attention please!" When I was at school, a teacher's voice would often break into and ruin my daydreams, particularly in lessons I disliked – geography, for example. Learning about the world around us should have been exciting and interesting, but I'm afraid reading a textbook and, if we were lucky, looking at a few pictures that were handed around just didn't cut it for me. I had no concept of what life was like in other countries until I went on my first exchange trip to Germany and, to be honest, that didn't really give me many more ideas – the family I stayed with declined to make much effort, unfortunately.

I'm happy to say that today the story is very different. Each day I communicate with friends and colleagues from all over the world, whether that be via Facebook, Twitter or Skype and at any time can find someone online to answer questions and collaborate or socialise

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with. The internet has made the world seem much smaller and allowed teachers and pupils to work together with peers from many different countries.
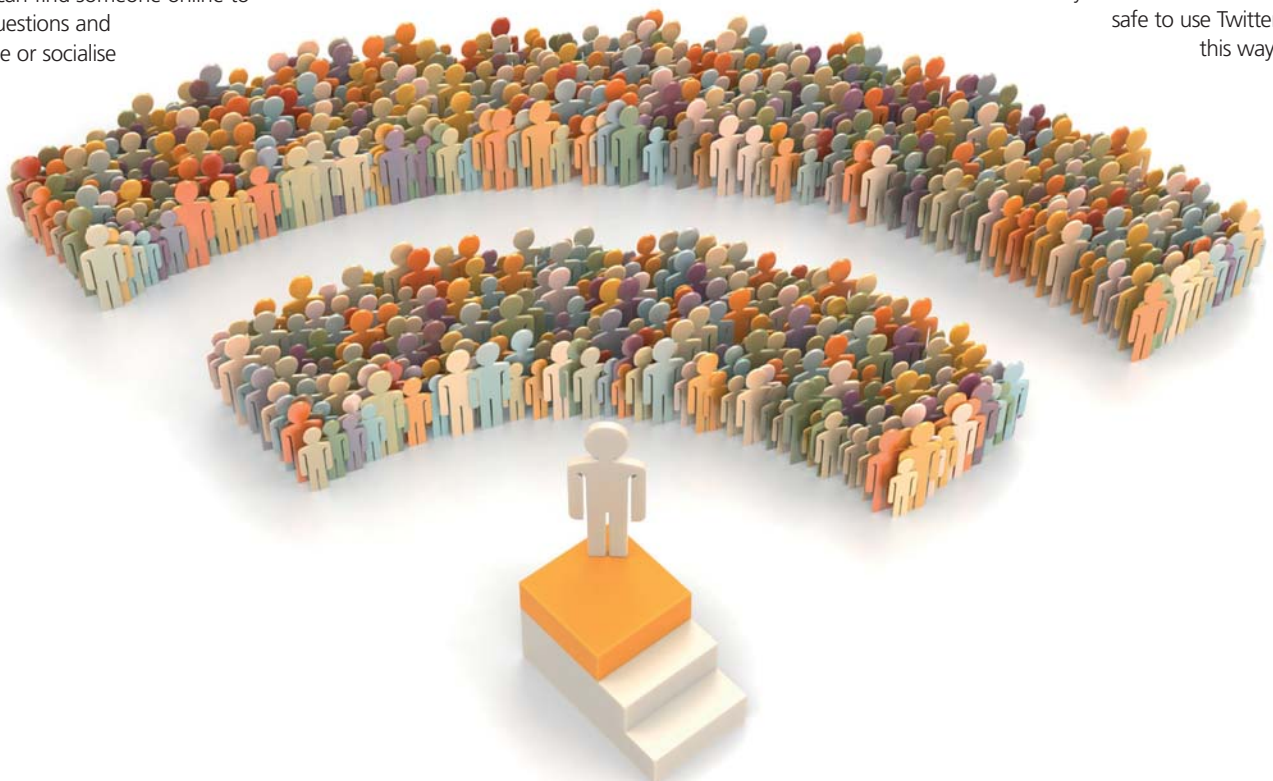
Twitter as a learning tool

Twitter has become a valuable CPD tool for many of us involved in education, as it allows friendly, easy interaction with global colleagues. The education community on Twitter is extremely generous with its ideas and support. On Thursday evenings a group chat takes place under the hashtag #ukedchat and different topics are discussed each week. Recent weeks have seen colleagues talk about the proposed cuts to Booktrust funding and how schools will plan their CPD in future. Anyone can join in or just sit on the sidelines and read the posts as they happen.

I have used Twitter personally with young people to write a collaborative story, with the first tweet setting the scene and following tweets from international schools continuing the plot. Working on a story in this way did not feel like 'proper' writing for the students, yet restricting plot twists to 140 characters took skill and their contributions were eloquent and exciting. It is also possible to 'lock down' the account you use so that it is very safe to use Twitter in this way.

The learning power of blogs

Class blogs are becoming increasingly popular and are a great way of allowing students to write for a public audience. An amazing example of a class blog that really works is the Heathfield Y6 blog (http://y62011.heathfieldcps.net). Run by deputy headteacher David Mitchell, the blog attracts lots of attention and comments. Mr Mitchell (Twitter name @DeputyMitchell) feels the blog has had a really positive impact. "Comments on blog posts are one of the most powerful tools to enhance learning that I have come across in 13 years of teaching," he enthuses. "Last term, my Y6 blog received over 2000 comments. Every single one of these was positive and helped raise the self-esteem of the post author. About 500 of those comments also addressed next steps for the pupils too. To try and replicate comments on that scale would have resulted in spending every night commenting on blog posts, weekends and holidays.

"The pupils have been very public in telling me that comments from people other then their teacher are really quite special. The only thing that my pupils say is more special than that are comments from people in other parts of the world. My pupils see it as an even bigger achievement that their blog post has attracted a wider audience. That, along with tools that record where visitors have come from, really does help to raise the enthusiasm of my pupils. What better way to prepare my pupils for a life of employment where the world is instant, reflective and smaller than it has ever been before?"

Virtual author visits

Using online media can, of course, also save your school money. One very good example of this is the birth of virtual author visits. Tommy Donbavand, author of the brilliant Scream Street series, has been proactive in starting this. His first visit was with Holmesdale School in Kent. Tommy 'visited' Y8 pupils at the school on three consecutive days to deliver writing

tip

workshops via video conferencing. Caroline Roche, librarian at Holmesdale, had some very positive things to say about the experience. "The pupils learnt about how to plot stories, develop characters, choose a title and end a book well. The sessions went well with only the smallest of glitches – sometimes the screen froze for a few seconds. In general, the pupils settled down and seemed to forget that Tommy wasn't actually in the room with them! The advantages to us were savings in cost. Tommy lives in Lancashire and travelling expenses plus overnight stays in Kent would have been expensive. Virtual visits are also convenient as they only take up 40 minutes of each day."

Voicethread your opinion

Voicethread **www.voicethread.com** is probably the most useful tool I have discovered for working collaboratively. It is a way of putting content online (images, video, text) in the form of a slide show. This can then be shared with others who can contribute by making comments via text, video or audio. A colleague in London has used Voicethread to collate views on a local book award and another ran a poetry project. Some good examples of using Voicethread can also be seen on the Heathfield blog mentioned above.

With all of these fantastic, often free methods of communication at our fingertips, there hasn't been a better time to broaden the horizons of the children in your class, not to mention your own. Why not arrange a Twitter chat with an expert on the subject you are teaching, have a Skype chat with a class in Australia or just join Twitter and start sharing with all the fantastic educators that are there? Good luck and see you there!

In issue 5.4 of Teach Primary, David Mitchell of Heathfield CP School will be looking in detail at how to start a successful class blog.

Publish children's work

WHY NOT GET INVOLVED THE WRITE PATH, BEV HUMPHREY'S COLLABORATIVE LITERACY PROJECT?

Whilst looking for a way to harness a group of secondary school boys' passion for technology – and work on their aversion to writing and reading – I set up the The Write Path project. During this event, published authors and poets write the first paragraph of a story, six of which are posted up on a collaborative website each day (writepath.ning.com). Between six and eight schools a day then have an hour to work on a continuing paragraph or stanza to each of the day's stories or poems. Many schools also have Skype video calls between them or, if this is not possible, they Skype me for a quick chat. At the end of the project all of the stories and poems are published in books so that the young people become published authors and poets. The event has been so successful that it has grown from one day to two weeks, and further events will go on all year.

Bev's website is www.bevhumphrey.com/"bevhumphrey.com and her Twitter name is @Libwithattitude