Education

Julia Steiny: 'Learn 360' provides lesson tools and standards guides for teachers

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Today, any school that still offers classes in "technology" or "computer skills" is so 20th century. Technology is an integral part of everyday life and almost all jobs. As such, it should be embedded into every student's regular lessons and assignments.

The kids in your district probably have plenty of technology, in school and at home. And the teachers are so comfortable with high-tech resources that they routinely create lessons that teach computer skills as a byproduct of teaching something else. Their students use technology all the time, for research, presentations, spreadsheet analyses, word-processing.

But embedding technology in all subjects is not typical throughout Rhode Island. It should be.

One problem is that a teacher's whole summer could get eaten by hunting all over the Internet for relevant videos, period music and pictures, or computer-simulated science experiments. Yes, the technical term for such work is "surfing," which sounds fun, but teachers prefer academic surfing inside well-vetted, online libraries designed with them in mind.

So for years, Rhode Island's Public Broadcasting Station has arranged group discounts for the state's schools, with companies that supply teachers with just such libraries of Web-based educational materials. When their contract with their last vendor became prohibitively expensive, RIPBS switched to a similar service, "Learn 360," whose mission includes remaining affordable to schools in lean times.

While still sitting at his desk in Chicago, regional sales director Craig Twaddle gave me a "Webinar" tour of the Learn 360 site. RIPBS will offer similar tours for local users — novice, advanced and subject-specific teachers.

Every quarter, Learn 360 uploads new material to its "content database." Currently, they have more than 8,300 digital videos, as well as speeches, images, articles and audio files. Their sources include the Concise Britannica Encyclopedia (over 25,000 articles); AETV, which includes A&E, Biography and The History Channel; Weston

Woods, PBS, WGBH, Sunburst Visual Media, National Geographic, and Scholastic Audio, among others.

Many of the full videos are cut into 1- to 5-minute clips. Teachers can show, say, a whole video about Darwin and evolution or a 5-minute clip on "Climbing the Evolutionary Ladder," depending on what suits the teacher's objectives that day.

So imagine that Monday's class will introduce the Civil War. The teacher has a whiteboard or a projector and begins by showing a video to the whole class. The class can go backward or forward, just as when you're watching YouTube. Teacher and kids talk over what they've seen.

Online, the teacher has posted the class and homework for the next couple of weeks. Students and adults have individual passwords to the site. The school can decide how much of the site it wants the kids to see, which may or may not include the teachers' guides. Kids log on and see the list with the Civil War assignments. Teachers can upload articles they've scanned, or other materials, such as a homemade video of a Civil War reenactment. Over the two weeks, students watch clips, hear period music and see daguerreotype photos.

Teachers can integrate materials into podcasts, presentations, activities and even quizzes and tests. The software will automatically grade any test that is true or false or multiple choice. The teacher can also post an essay prompt. Kids can do the work at school, in a computer lab at the library, or at home.

Impressively, most of the clips, songs and even the still shots are mapped against Rhode Island's own standards, the Grade Level Expectations — when there are standards. (I was shocked to find, as a result of poking around Learn 360, that Rhode Island has no state standards for the parts of speech — adjectives, verbs and the like.)

As an English teacher, I can choose the clip "Gathering Evidence," from a full video called "Essay Writing Techniques in English," and click the link to our state standards to see exactly what that clip supports. If my kids need a better grounding in the importance of citing sources and supporting theses with evidence, I click the clip's standards for links to more materials that will help me embed that information into the kids' heads.

Among other things, it's an easy, interesting way to become familiar with our standards.

Teachers can identify their grade level or subject area, so the software will hide anything irrelevant.

And the site will store teachers' work, so it's all ready for a tweak when they go back to the lesson next year.

RIPBS education director Maria Velasquez worries that lots of schools have had access to RIPBS' "digital services," such as Learn 360, but that teachers haven't known it was there for them. Through PBS, the costs are modest: $500 per year for public schools with more than 200 kids, and for private and parochial schools; less for small public schools. Schools have been signing up.

To experiment with this service, log on to Learn 360 for a 30-day free trial. Or get a password from your school, if it's already part of the Learn 360 group. To sign up or ask questions, contact Velasquez at (401) 222-3636, ext. 365.

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