

The Value of Virtual Visits

Feature

Included in many discussions about 21st-century classrooms is the importance of expanding learning opportunities beyond the four walls of the classroom and school. Virtual visits via Skype, Google Hangouts, or other tools like Face Time help create learning communities beyond the classroom walls. Whether connecting regionally, across continents, or internationally, it is empowering for students and teachers alike to connect with other learners. Skype visits help students learn how to meet and interact with those beyond their established communities. Students can practice public speaking and hone skills related to expressing an idea or describing a project to authentic audiences. For ease and clarity, I'll use the term "Skype" here to refer to any virtual visits, as it is the primary way the students and I connect virtually with other people. We've found the greatest success with four kinds of Skype opportunities: literacy events, author and illustrator Skype visits, classroom-to-classroom Skype visits, and professional and expert Skype visits.

Literacy Events

We've used various literacy initiatives to connect with authors and illustrators as well as other classrooms. Some events are well-established for connecting virtually, including Dot Day in September; Read Across America Day and World Read Aloud Day in March; Poem in Your Pocket Day in April; and DIA in May. These events are a manageable way to break into Skype visits if you are new to the medium. Most connections last somewhere between ten and twenty minutes—enough time for introductions and a short story. These occasions are not the time for questions and answers, as many authors, illustrators, and classroom teachers are trying to make as many connections as possible.

We first started to broaden our virtual connections with other classrooms during World Read Aloud Day (WRAD), a day where people around the globe raise their voices in story to demonstrate the value and importance of global literacy initiatives. WRAD is an initiative of LitWorld, an organization that brings literacy programs to the communities that need them. Many teachers and librarians participate for an entire week, marked by making new friends, reading books together, and creating memories. For example, one year we gathered our third to fifth grade students, along with eight other schools from North and South America, for a Skype visit with the amazing Kate DiCamillo. WRAD provides an opportunity to create connections beyond the four walls of the library classroom, many of which are the start of yearlong learning communities. If you are new to Skype, WRAD is a great time to give these virtual visits a try. The connections are generally short and the only preparation is choosing a book to read aloud and going over norms with your students.

Dot Day is another international celebration that lends itself to connecting via Skype. Students read *The Dot*, share ways they have made their Marks, and often exchange dot trading cards. The best way to make connections for virtual visits is through Twitter. Watch your Twitter feed in the weeks leading up to the events for people organizing Skype visits. You can also Tweet out your own requests.

Author and Illustrator Visits

Virtual visits connect readers with authors and illustrators, often for free, but at least a less expensive way to bring them into the classroom. Author and illustrator Skype connections afford many of the same experiences as face-to-face visits. The authors and illustrators share background information as well as the stories behind their stories. There is an opportunity to see the artist in action: screen share makes it up front and personal. The illustrators will often send these drawings along digitally if created via technology or in hard copy via snail mail and authors will send along the story starters. The question and answer period is also the same and can be easily managed virtually by having some questions prepared in advance. It also helps to call on students if the virtual visitor feels more comfortable, but many describe students by shirt color or pattern. My lunch bunch book group connected with an author after reading her novel. It was a very personal experience and the students were able to have quite specific questions about the book answered.

Mystery Skype Visits

In a classic Mystery Skype the two classrooms race to see which one can guess the other's geographic location first, using only yes and no questions. It's exciting to see students poring over atlases and maps trying to pinpoint a location. The students in these classrooms are a primary source of information. While studying the geographic regions, connect with students in classrooms in those regions for a quick data collection. My students participated in a conversation with students from Pennsylvania that wanted to learn about the geography of Massachusetts. It was thrilling to watch my students parse out information and come up with answers. For the mystery Skype visits it works to have students working in groups: one group answering questions, one asking questions, and one checking maps. You can also set up small groups that take turns asking questions. Mystery Number Skype visits are also becoming popular—think STEM!

Classroom-to-classroom Skype visits often evolve from their initial connections, like a Mystery Skype. This past year we had classrooms that regularly connected to share

projects. My students benefited from continued connections with the students of educators Shawna Ford, Kathy Schmidt, John Schumacher, Andy Plemmons, and Matthew Winner. With our partners in Texas, we learned about green screen technology, while we taught them about the app Tellagami. The students also shared Internet Safety and behavior expectations projects.

Connecting with Professionals and Experts

An area in which I hope to grow our experience is connecting virtually with professionals and experts in the field, especially around technology and science. Many of the new app developers are willing to connect to talk with students about math, coding, and the importance of STEM. Weather units lend themselves to connections with meteorologists. Each Skype connection also brings the world closer for students and sows the seeds of global citizenship. The song lyrics “make this world a better place, if you can” seem appropriate in this context. Who knows where these connections will lead and what new ideas will arise!

Tips for Getting Started

- Always check for Skype updates. The program now prompts users, but in the past it did not and there would be sound and video inconsistencies because an update had not been run.
- Be flexible. Depending upon the event and purpose of the Skype, we connect where appropriate in the school, sometimes it is with me and the students alone during library class, sometimes it is in the classroom with the teacher, and sometimes it is multiple classes together in the library or auditorium.
- Given the difference in academic years, the best time to connect is October through April.
- Don't worry if there is a technology glitch. It has happened to everyone, at least once. These are teachable moments and opportunities for students to observe you working through a problem. The students are also natural problem solvers and will happily throw out ideas and suggestions.
- Visit Kate Messner's list of authors and illustrators who Skype for free: <http://www.katemessner.com/authors-who-skype-with-classes-book-clubs-for-free/>

For more tips, see the Use This Page "[Be A Virtual Visit Virtuoso!](#)"

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