

Engaging students with AASL's best websites for teaching and learning

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Abstract:

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Best Websites for Teaching and Learning Committee created its first list of 25 winning websites in the summer of 2009. When the committee originated as a task force in 2008, it was charged with honoring websites, educational resources of high caliber, and inquiry-based teaching and online learning tools as represented in the 'AASL's Standards of the 21st Century Learner. Each year the committee offers a new list of websites that foster innovation, creativity, active participation, and collaboration. They are free, user-friendly sites that encourage teachers and learners to explore, discover, and promote critical thinking. In June 2012, the committee will be presenting their 100th website. Committee members spend an arduous year reviewing sites, commiserating over their value to the fields of teaching and learning, and choosing online tools best suited to win for that year. Over 100 websites will be reviewed each year before the final 25 are chosen.

Keywords: school libraries | American Association of School Librarians (AASL) | Best Websites for Teaching and Learning | Web 2.0 | Common Core

Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

FEATURE ARTICLE



"Don't go overboard trying to spruce up projects with digital bells and whistles."

Engaging Students with AASL's Best Websites for Teaching and Learning

MELISSA JACOBS ISRAEL AND HEATHER MOOREFIELD-LANG

INTRODUCTION

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Best Websites for Teaching and Learning Committee created its first list of 25 winning websites in the summer of 2009. When the committee originated as a task force in 2008, it was charged with honoring websites, educational resources of high caliber, and inquiry-based teaching and online learning tools as represented in the AASL's *Standards of the 21st Century Learner*. Each year the committee offers a new list of websites that foster innovation, creativity, active participation, and collaboration. They are free, user-friendly sites that encourage teachers and learners to explore, discover, and promote critical thinking. In June 2012, the committee will be presenting their 100th website. Committee members spend an arduous year reviewing sites, commiserating over their value to the fields of teaching and learning, and choosing online tools best suited to win for that year. Over 100 websites will be reviewed each year before the final 25 are chosen.

WEBSITE SELECTION CRITERIA

In order for sites to be considered, the committee has developed a list of evaluation criteria, which includes free access to a majority of the site, user friendliness, low percentage of advertisements, age appropriateness of existing advertisements, strong curricular integration, innovation, promotion of collaborative teaching and learning, and facilitation of a community of learning. Websites are nominated by committee members, school librarians, and public recommendations on the committee's website (<http://www.ala.org/aasl/guidelinesandstandards/bestlist/bestwebsitesnomination>). Sites are reviewed and evaluated in a variety of settings, some of which include individual practice, one-on-one with students, classroom situations, and school libraries. Once sites are chosen, they are placed in categories: digital storytelling, management and organization, content collaboration, curricular sharing, social networking and communication, media sharing, and content resources.

In 2009, two different lists were created. Because this was the launch year for the AASL Best Websites list, there was a best list and a Landmark Websites list. The Landmark Websites were honored for exemplary histories of authoritative, engaging content and curricular relevance. These sites were also free, user-friendly, and encouraged learners to explore and discover. The sites were organized in three categories: content resources, lesson plans

and more; collaboration; and global education. Following are some examples of sites on the Landmark list.

CONTENT RESOURCES, LESSON PLANS AND MORE

Discovery Education (<http://community.discoveryeducation.com/>) offers lesson plans, grants, science help, and more. Kathy Shrock's guide to educators is housed here as well.

The Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/index.html>) provides over 13 million digitized primary sources.

Read Write Think (<http://www.readwritethink.org/>) focuses on learning language, learning through language, and learning about language. This is a great site for any language arts, ESL, or English teacher.

COLLABORATION

Moodle (<http://moodle.org/>) is a free course-management tool that can be used in elementary through college classrooms. Moodle allows teachers to create Internet-based courses and websites. With open source software, anyone can create sites for their students to use in and for class.

GLOBAL EDUCATION

Google Earth (<http://www.google.com/earth/index.html>) provides a three-dimen-

sional view of the earth, ocean, and sky. This innovative product lets classes explore the globe in a way that has never been done before.

These are only a few of the sites from the Landmark list. Though these sites may be considered foundational or early in the field of educational websites, they should not be discounted as useful and dynamic in content. All of the Landmark sites are current and have moved forward as the web entered the 2.0 era and mobile technologies were integrated into people's daily lives. Many of these sites now have apps to download, two-way interactions for students and teachers, video streaming, and much more. Don't let the Landmark status fool you; these sites earned a best website ranking as well.

In 2009 the Best Websites Committee also released their first list, and a list has been released each subsequent year during a summer presentation at the American Library Association (ALA) annual conference. Here is a sampling of winners from the past three years.

MANAGE AND ORGANIZE

Diigo (<http://www.diigo.com/>) is a social bookmarking site that lets users save and tag websites, add sticky notes and annotations, and share them with other users in various groups.

Spicy Nodes (<http://www.spicynodes.org/>) is a concept-mapping presentation tool that allows users to embed pictures, videos, websites, and more. It is very intuitive and fun to use.

CONTENT COLLABORATION

Polleverywhere (<http://www.polleverywhere.com/>) is a voting platform that can be used in classrooms and libraries to gather answers to any question. Students and users can vote by sending a text message via phone or on the web.

DIGITAL STORYTELLING

International Children's Digital Library (<http://en.childrenslibrary.org/>) contains

the largest digital collection of children's books, with over 4,400 books in 54 languages representing 64 countries, with applications for the iPhone and iPad.

SOCIAL NETWORKING AND COMMUNICATION

Ted (<http://www.ted.com/>) is a well-known website that shares ideas from the world's most innovative thinkers and experts related to technology, entertainment, design, business, science, and global issues.

Edmodo (<http://www.edmodo.com/>) is a secure online learning network for teachers and students. It gives libraries and classrooms a safe and easy place to connect and collaborate, share ideas and content, and access homework, grades, and school announcements.

MEDIA SHARING

Tagxedo (<http://www.tagxedo.com/>) allows users to create fantastic projects with word clouds. Choose a picture or shape,

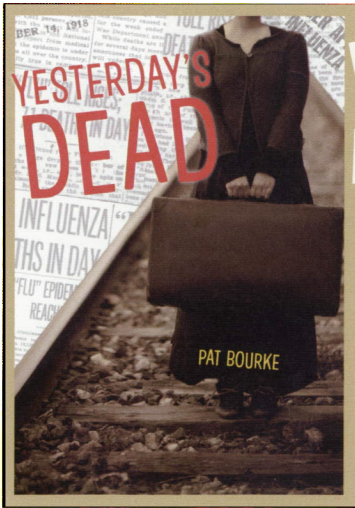
then add words and make a visually enticing display. Tagxedo can be used to demonstrate speeches, reports, or anything you can imagine.

CURRICULUM SHARING

Khan Academy (<http://www.khanacademy.org/>) is an incredibly popular, fast-growing video library that provides thousands of videos with alternative, engaging instruction in math, physics, finance, and history. Always expanding and improving, this is a rich resource for instruction and learning.

CONTENT RESOURCES: LESSON PLANS AND MORE

Lingt Language (<http://lingtlanguage.com/>) allows students to practice foreign language skills online. Teachers can build assignments that use voice, video, images, and text, and students can interact with posted assignments.



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Currently, there are 75 sites that AASL has honored and promoted for teaching and learning. It is now the charge of librarians and teachers to recommend these sites in a constructive manner to students by integrating them into the instructional process. Although the sites have been professionally vetted, it is essential to select sites that are appropriate for your classroom and students.

THE TANGLE OF WEB 2.0

The Internet provides teachers with a vast amount of tools and information to use with students. AASL's Best Websites for Teaching and Learning help educators navigate this landscape by vetting the finest of these resources. Nevertheless, the sites only benefit the learning process if they are used effectively. The selected websites all connect with learning and have the capacity to capture a student's attention by engaging the learner in the process. However, the use of these websites can often overpower the purpose of using them in the first place, consequently becoming a muddled tangle.

Don't go overboard trying to spruce up projects with digital bells and whistles. Resist the urge to use countless Web 2.0 tools in an assignment or even throughout the academic year. As an alternative, consider mastering five sites from the Best Websites annual lists (perhaps one from each category) and build a student's familiarity with these selected tools by teaching information literacy skills and content. Students will appreciate the consistency of using a Web 2.0 tool multiple times and may themselves become experts on the chosen sites. Help students build instructional toolboxes filled with several sites that they can independently choose when an application is appropriate and how to apply it. Digital tools are a means for accomplishing the tasks at hand and should not overpower the skills that are being taught by librarians and teachers.

For example, one of AASL's 2011 winners is Zooburst (www.zooburst.com), which enables users to create 3-D digital storybooks. Students can manipulate free images and build three-dimensional digi-

tal stories. It is a unique platform for students to collaborate, share narratives, and create anecdotes. It can be used across content areas and weaved throughout the curriculum as a means for delivering projects, presenting information, expressing ideas, and sharing with an audience. Start by introducing Zooburst to faculty and begin weaving it into a multitude of projects. Over time and with continued use, students will master the site, and their focus will shift away from learning how to use Zooburst to deciding when to use Zooburst. The repetitive integration of the same Web 2.0 tool will also provide students with skills that are transferable from one site to another. Most of the functions in Zooburst are similar to other programs with graphical manipulation tools.

WEB 2.0 AND THE COMMON CORE LEARNING STANDARDS

In many states across the country, today's educational trend focuses on the instructional shifts of the common core learning standards released in 2010. These standards are rich with critical-thinking skills that prepare students for college and careers. As such, the integration of vetted Web 2.0 tools that encourage collaborative work, innovation, and inquiry are essential. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21), a national organization that advocates for readiness for students, emphasizes the importance of fusing critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, and innovation into education. AASL's Best Websites for Teaching and Learning provide sites that boost the instructional process and reinforce skills that are commonly desired in 21st-century employees.

FUTURE WORK FOR THE COMMITTEE

In the future, the AASL Best Websites Committee for Teaching and Learning plans to continue presenting top websites for librarians and their fellow educators to use in their classrooms and professional development. Members of the committee

will continue to publish and present at the local, state, and national level to share sites and information with those in the field of teaching and learning. Recently, committee members have been writing the AASL blog, sharing methods and practical ideas on how the Best Websites can be used in schools. The committee would also like to step outside of the library field and begin to present and publish in education, curriculum, and technology venues, knowing that the Best Websites List could be of use across multiple disciplines. The year 2012 brings the arrival of sites 76-100; it is a very exciting year for our committee. We hope to see many wonderful Best Websites Lists in the years ahead that we will be able to share with librarians and other educators who can in turn use them to aid in the education of their students.

Melissa Jacobs Israel is a coordinator in the Office of Library Services for the New York City Department of Education. In that role, she created the New York City School Librarian Information Sharing Tool (NYCSLIST) listserv, which hosts over 1,000 school librarians. Israel serves as a member of the AASL Best Websites for Teaching and Learning Committee and enjoys exploring emerging technologies, apps, social media, lifelong learning, and obsessively collecting cookbooks. Connect with Israel on Twitter (@missyjji) or email her at mjacobs7@schools.nyc.gov.

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