

BRINGING THE WORLD TO THE CLASSROOM

Social Media for Social Good

As a young social entrepreneur, I have spent the past 10 years developing programs that promote positive youth leadership through the power of digital media. I have met many principals whose schools are technologically dynamic places for learning through discovery. I have visited schools where technology is integrated across subject areas and where the classroom includes students from all over the world. In these schools, I find students who are compassionate and empowered to become strong leaders, using their skills to forge a better future for all the peoples of the world.

But I have also met with many principals and teachers who do not know where to begin, who worry that their schools are now at risk of becoming irrelevant. They face the steep challenge of inspiring teachers with a diverse level of skills to embrace new technologies and re-think the structure of the classroom so that students can fulfill their potential. Is this type of challenge a roadblock or a wonderful opportunity? For schools like these, it is often a question of where to begin. For other schools, it is a question of how to continue.

In this article, I discuss the power of leveraging social networking technology in the classroom setting for social good. I give examples from *TakingITGlobal's* online suite of tools and its classroom-specific platform, *TIGed*. I also discuss the power of the classroom (technology aside) and the role of principals and teachers in helping the next generation to build a better tomorrow.

The Power of the Classroom

The Catholic school classroom plays a unique and powerful role. Unlike other institutions such as business and political institutions, it remains a relatively stable force in the lives of students, as the majority of their days are spent in the classroom, in the school. We know a classroom can be a safe haven when the rest of a student's life may be in chaos.

Classrooms can foster creativity and growth at a time when young people are at a transient stage of life. In addition, the classroom can be a key shaping factor in the development of a young person, within and beyond the school. Instructors teach not only textbook skills, but also life skills and values that include compassion and generosity. Many also teach the reality that we live in a global world, where all of our lives are inextricably connected, whether one lives in the developed or the developing world.

The best classrooms are making use of technology that speaks to youth, to foster resiliency at a stage in their lives when they are still idealistic in their perspectives. In the digital age, this means being plugged in to the technologies that our students are using and finding ways to use these technologies for social good. Fittingly, some of the best ideas of the future are being forged in the creative classroom, using online tools that are easy to use and available to all. Programs such as global classroom exchanges provide students and teachers with the technology tools for learning and the free exchange of diverse perspectives that will shape their lives.

Taking It Global: Connecting Youth

In 1999, I co-founded *TakingITGlobal* with Michael Furdyk, director of technology. What we did was in some senses simple, but it had never been done before. Long before *Facebook* or *MySpace*, Michael and I used our technology and organizing skills to create a free social network for social change, an online hub for youth to express their concerns, frustrations and ideas about issues that mattered, locally and globally. We did not want advertising dollars. What we wanted was a space for young people to gather who cared, to uncover the power of their own voices. We leveraged the opportunity of web-based technologies to connect youth globally through *TakingITGlobal.org*.

TakingITGlobal.org (TIG) is an online collaborative learning community, which provides youth with access to global opportunities, cross-cultural connections and meaningful participation in decision-making. TIG harnesses internet technologies to cultivate youth leadership and engagement in social issues and champions the role of young people as key stakeholders in all aspects of society. Our vision is for youth everywhere to become engaged and connected in shaping a more inclusive, peaceful and sustainable world.

Since its creation in 2000, TIG has reached over 10,000,000 youth and generated over a million pages of content. In 2009, TIG members generated over 163,000 actions, which range from pledges to community and global projects that raise awareness





TIGed: Classroom-based Tools for Educators

In 2006, we decided to build upon TakingITGlobal.org, which reached youth outside of the classroom. We built a set of tools specific for teachers and classrooms, TakingITGlobal for Educators (TIGed) at www.tiged.org. This is an international community of globally-minded educators, a database of global education resources and a suite of secure online classrooms designed especially for teachers. Currently the TIGed community comprises a community of more than 4,000 global educators and 19,000 students in over 100 countries.

In developing TIGed, educators were consulted in order to adapt TIG's social networking and collaboration tools within a teacher-moderated online learning environment. As a result, it is a teacher-friendly, Web 2.0 platform, with project-based learning initiatives and practical tools that teachers with all levels of technological knowledge can use.

Using TIGed virtual classrooms, teachers can create, moderate and control content to fit the needs of their students and objectives of their curriculum. Classroom tools include blogs, podcasts, maps, image galleries, live video chats, discussion boards and online file storage, allowing students to demonstrate their learning, express themselves, engage in constructive dialogue around important topics and develop a portfolio of their work. They can do all this within a private, secure, and advertising-free online environment. Through TIGed, educators can also choose from six thematic classrooms where they have access to virtual classrooms, which come pre-loaded with bookmarks, assignments and websites on topics, which vary, from climate change to smoking.

Speaking UP: It is about more than Technology

In our rush to adopt new technologies (including social networking) to the classroom, we must always remember that no amount of professional development or *smart classrooms* alone will be able to make a difference. A class is still only as smart (or as wise) as its teachers.

This became clear when I recently learned more about SpeakUP (www.ontario.ca/speakup), created by the Ontario Ministry of Education. The Minister wanted to hear ideas from students about how to strengthen their engagement in learning. As part of the project, a Minister's Student Advisory Council was created. The council was composed of a diverse group of 60 students from grades 7 to 12.

What students need, more than any software, is to be mentored and to be seen as vital parts of the community in which they live, as well as in the global community. In fact, one of the most powerful projects that came out of SpeakUP was *The Memory Initiative*. Eleven under-engaged students interviewed a group of veterans about their memories of war and its aftermath. Some students wrote the veterans' stories, some painted their portraits and others worked on compiling the stories on a DVD.

The project was a success because it brought generations together in dialogue about a universal issue. In honouring the voices of the veterans, the students' own voices as writers, painters and editors became part of the story. The project was enhanced by

and direct action to impact lives and create a better world. Using TIG's free online tools, individual young leaders can create groups and projects, blog, share resources, participate in projects with nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and other partners, learn about events and opportunities, engage in public policy processes and more. The main website is divided into six sections: Youth Media, Community, Action Tools, Resources, Global Issues and Regions. Each section is designed as a pillar to create an environment that promotes leadership.

All of these sections are relatable to classroom content. The Youth Media section is a space for creative expression that includes a Global Gallery, where students can publish their artistic expressions. The Community section allows youth to connect with other students across the globe around shared interests. They are able to inspire, inform and involve each other through interaction on TIG's member profiles, discussion boards and member stories. TIG's Action Tools are specifically designed to answer the question, "What next?" They allow youth to create or sign a petition, create or join a group, become part of a project or start their own project. TIG members can also commit to making the world a better place through the Commitments page where they can pledge to do things like reducing the amount of plastic they use.

The Resources page provides resources such as links to organizations, event listings and a database of scholarships, volunteer and job opportunities as well as links to toolkits such as the *Guide to Action*. This toolkit is a free, downloadable guide that helps youth explore issues they care about and suggests ways they can take action and involve others in making a positive difference. The Global Issues page is designed so that youth can inform themselves and recognize global issues and events in relation to their own lives. The Regions section provides information about territory, population, land mass and more of every region across the globe, allowing youth to join a particular region and make contact with others who live there. They can follow blogs from members of that region and read about the activities and commitments in specific regions of the world.

technology, but communication was perhaps the most important skill being developed. A sense of connection among the students and the veterans gave the project its strength. This interdisciplinary project is an example of the best uses of classrooms as sites for learning through discovery, experience, dialogue and community. Connections can be made across cultures and generations, as students look beyond themselves at the bigger world, as they envision a more compassionate and humane future.

It is often said that imagination is one of the key ingredients in solving the problems that exist in the world today. Educators need to tap into the creative idealism of students as they build connections as global citizens. New technologies help us to reach across continents, not merely to play games or to buy products, but to build the vital linkages that affirm our interconnectedness, our shared humanity and our shared desire for a better future, starting in our classrooms and echoing around the world.

Young Leaders: The Six Archetypes

Since the launch of *TakingITGlobal*, I have travelled to over 30 countries and had the chance to interact with young people from all over the world. What it means to be a leader is not in a single form. We need to embrace and understand the different approaches to leadership in order to solve the problems of the world today.

There are six archetypes of youth leader, as I see it:

- the Dreamer;
- the Megaphone;
- the Spark Plug;
- the Task Master;
- the Sherpa; and
- the Storyteller.

Dreamers are the people who look up and out. They have aspirations and they set the direction in which we are heading. We need to give the Dreamers a platform to articulate their dreams, so that their dreams are not silenced.

Example of a Dreamer: TakingITGlobal recently ran an art contest called *Imprints*. A girl named Andreea from Romania took home 2nd place with her animated short, *It's Me, The Earth!* a light-hearted film about climate change. Andreea is a Dreamer because she believes that each of us can make a difference in the world and she has the vision and imagination to create films that remind us of our power to make a change and compel us to act.

Megaphones are the youth who speak out against injustice. We need to give the Megaphones greater amplifiers so that their voices can reach farther and wider.

Example of a Megaphone: I met Ryan, who is 19 from Canada at the International AIDS conference in Mexico. He had travelled to Kenya and he was devastated by the impact that HIV/AIDS had on the communities there. He returned to his high school and shared the stories of the people he met. He raised thousands of dollars and helped mobilize the red ribbon campaign for World AIDS Day. Ryan is a Megaphone, skilled at raising awareness (and in his case, funds) about an important issue.

The Spark Plug connects and brings people together. When people who have shared interests come together, they generate new ideas. Gifted educators are able to bring Spark Plugs together so that they can spread their message even further to greater sources of power and influence.

Example of a Spark Plug: Spark Plugs are the people who start groups, create a commitment and get others involved.

The Task Master organizes and plans. They are the people who organize conferences and take on various projects.

Example of a Task Master: TakingITGlobal co-organized the World Youth Congress in Quebec, where many action projects were created. I was able to see Task Masters emerge, where they took charge of projects across the province, working with local organizations to address community needs. It is vital that we encourage youth to have the confidence to step up and take charge.

Sherpas share their skills and knowledge as guides, mentors and educators. They are people who fly and do not want to fly alone. They run workshops, tutor and mentor and share what they have learned with others. They are not just sharing; they are also taking the time, the pace, whatever it takes to help bring people along.

Example of a Sherpa: This year I attended the sixth Microsoft Asia Pacific Regional Innovative Education Forum. One of the mentors I encountered was Shobana who is 19, from Malaysia. The year before, Shobana was one of the participants who were being mentored. Within one year, she was giving back and acting as a mentor for the next generation! Shobana exemplifies that if you invest in creating leadership opportunities for youth, they will be the first ones to give back, in Shobana's case within a year.

Storytellers experience, understand and communicate what they have discovered. They are vital because they tell the stories of the people who are creating the waves of change, which allows for an even greater impact. In a world where we are bombarded by tales of sadness and destruction, storytellers use their power to share messages of hope. They are creating a completely new narrative for what is possible.

Example of a Storyteller: I met a young man at the Arab Youth Forum named Mohammed, who travels to high schools in his country sharing a message of youth-led development and change, inspiring students about the opportunity they have to make a positive difference in society.