Think.com

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ABSTRACT

Think.com is a free, web-based environment for primary through secondary students and educators. Think.com supports online learning communities with the tools and space to create and share their work online. Both students and teachers have the ability to easily *create*, *communicate* and *collaborate* with their peers in an online environment. Integration of Think.com into the curriculum provides students an exciting new venue for learning, and facilitates global communication and collaboration within a learning community.

Keywords

Create, Communicate, Collaborate, K12, Online Learning Community

INTRODUCTION

Think.com is a unique tool that allows educators to participate in a collaborative learning community for primary and secondary education. It is currently available in the United States and the United Kingdom, with pilots in New Zealand and Chile. Learn more about Think.com during our two CSCL sessions and in the Collaboratorium.

CLASSROOM USAGE

The following two examples show two ways that educators may use Think.com to increase the learning opportunities offered to their pupils. Both examples are from the United Kingdom because Think.com was initially piloted there and hence has the longest observed usage in Britain.

Think.com Facilitates International Collaboration

The WebPlay project gives children the chance to interact with peers across the world, broadening their standard classroom learning. Think.com gives the children simple Internet tools to create their plays in a safe environment over the web. Through this collaborative project, schools write and produce a play across the Internet. The project brings primary school children from the UK and the USA together. Five schools in South London and 110 pupils from Los Angeles are writing and producing plays that will be shown over the Internet. The tools within Think.com allow children to effectively collaborate on the project. With its brainstorms, debating and email facilities, Think.com provides a unique platform for the WebPlay project. When the plays are finished they will be shown using the Internet so the children can see the results of the project.

The Merton Education Business Partnership and Southwark Education Business Alliance in the UK, along with the Los Angeles Unified School District in United States, developed WebPlay. Actors and staff from *Polka Theatre for Children* also joined the project, and will assist with script writing and provide workshops to the pupils and teachers taking part. *Polka* will also perform a play specially written for WebPlay entitled "Moon Shadow", to UK children involved in the project, then travel to the USA on 16th March to perform and coach the children in America. Using the Internet the children are able to exchange notes, review the play and also exchange ideas for their own productions.

Think.com Motivates Disaffected Students

Fiona Garrett of Boston Spa School was awarded a DfEE (Department for Education and Employment) Best Practice Research Scholarship this year. Below, she shares her research of the use of Think.com with disaffected children.

"My research project focuses on a group of students who are categorized in school as 'disaffected' and part of my role is to teach English to these students who are following a year eleven 'alternative curriculum'. My research project combines Think.com and this particular group of students. The question I chose to examine was: "Can the use of Think.com and consequently membership of an online community alter/improve the learning outcomes of a group of 'disaffected' students?"

A profile of the students is integral to this project. All students were in year 11 and had been classified as 'disaffected'. They had been identified towards the end of year 10 as either very disruptive, poor attendees, or consistently failing in most areas of the curriculum and consequently 'switched off'. This group of students was enrolled in an alternative year 11 course with the following objectives: to withdraw students from main stream; provide them with the opportunity to do a combination of work experience, college courses and continue studying core subjects but in small groups with work differentiated to meet their specific needs.

My hypothesis was that the students in this group were poorly motivated towards work. They had displayed this lack of motivation by rejecting their entitlement to the national curriculum in one way or another and consequently earning a place in the group. Thus in order to improve motivation and encourage the students to use a variety of skills, they had to be exposed to something that would provide a catalyst to motivation. I considered Think.com to be a system designed to offer something suitably new and interesting resulting in a positive change in motivation and work ethic.

The research is primarily ethnographic supported by in-depth qualitative interviews and some analysis of written work completed before and after exposure to Think.com. I have come to a range of conclusions:

- The ability to interact freely with other members of the community offers important learning gains.
- The natural differentiation that the technology allows is ideal for a group of this kind.
- The girls seemed more interested initially in the idea of a 'global' audience for their ideas.
- Think.com gives the students the ability to construct an identity through word. This is interesting for a student who has avoided using words for many years.
- Feedback from the virtual audience has a very important impact on the students' view of their own page and motivation towards the project.
- The lack of pressure on the students to produce an assessed piece of work gave them the freedom to control the content rather than have it dictated to them.
- Most students need to see the potential of the site the first time they look at it in order to feel inspired.
- Students need to recognize that they control the content, and there are consequences for inclusion of inappropriate content.
- With a group of 'disaffected' students, relationship with the teacher is of critical importance.

Essentially the impact of Think.com has been a change in motivation. Learning how to use the system and taking ownership of their own pages meant students who would normally have to be forced to work in class or who refuse to do anything perceived as work became independent learners. They accessed their sites in their own time and made use of the system without me prompting them to log on. Both confidence and motivation have massive educational benefits. Students who engaged with Think.com learnt a variety of new skills, not least how to set up their own page, but also communication skills, writing skills, layout and organizational skills. Think.com provides a new audience for students who don't trust the audience in school. They are able to construct a new identity and receive genuine feedback from people who don't know their reputation or usual behavior. There are no expectations.

Think.com offers a working space that instantly 'looks good'. Many of these students are used to very poor work in terms of style and quality and don't want to produce output as they know their work will be difficult to read, messy and embarrassing. Think.com offers a very coherent, well-organized space that they can be instantly proud of. Think.com gives them 'space'. Think.com offers a certain level of instant outcomes for the student. It doesn't take long to have something tangible on your page. This speed is important to students who give up very quickly if they can't see an outcome. They are not restricted to constructing 'teacher friendly' work. They can use their space to show something about themselves. It allows them to work independently and not have the teacher breathing down their neck. A lot of these students have not worked in school for many years. It puts a lot of pressure on them when they do have to work and they react badly to being watched.

It has been an interesting project with a wide range of conclusions and applications for future work with similar disaffected students."

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