

A Personal Learning Environment: Polk County School District Connects with Students through the Student Portal

Vandy Pacetti-Tune  
Nova Southeastern University

Media Specialist  
Denison Middle School  
400 A Avenue SE  
Winter Haven, FL 33880

863-291-5353  
Fax 863-291-5347  
vp83@nova.edu

**Biography:**

Vandy Pacetti-Tune is a teacher/librarian serving as the Library Media Specialist at Denison Middle School. As a Florida Digital Educator, Ms. Tune provides technology training and encourages students to use technology with innovative programs. She anticipates completing her degree in ITDE at Nova Southeastern University in 2012.

School districts in Florida have been tasked with preparing learners to meet the demands of a global society. “The vision of the Polk County Public School system is that all students, teachers, and district staff have access to current and emerging technologies that will ensure innovation, academic and personal success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (PCSD, 2010). This vision statement sounds as if we are preparing for a future experience. But, isn’t the 21<sup>st</sup> century now?

According to Shaw (2009), “the new millennium was ushered in by a dramatic technological revolution. We now live in an increasingly diverse, globalized, and complex, media-saturated society.” Students now have the need to “communicate, function and create change personally, socially, economically, and politically on local, national, and global levels” (Shaw, 2009). If students are to be successful, they must be fluent in the use of Internet technologies and Web 2.0 capabilities. To become fluent, students must learn to use the tools we have now and develop the skills necessary to adapt to change when technology improves. So, how do we provide access?

Educational institutions must supply services that will allow students to function, create, and communicate so that they are prepared to function on a global level in the future. In attempting to meet this vision, a number of technological dilemmas are presented.

Dilemma #1: Not all users have the same abilities or needs.

Generally, school districts must contend with three distinct user groups when providing media and cyber literacy. Some students and staff members are not media literate or cyber literate. School is the first and only place they use a computer. Smart phones and the terminology of smart technologies have little or no meaning to them. The word “e-reader” presents itself as a typo. This lack of tech-savvy nature creates a challenge in providing services to these users and they must be taught the language and function of media and cyber literacies to become effective users.

The largest group of students and staff members understands how to use some Internet technologies for entertainment purposes, but is not truly literate. The use of the computer or other technologies takes on the role of a hobby and when confronted with genuine tasks or real-world applications to perform, this group is not successful. The challenge for these users is first to accept that they have something to learn and then learn media and cyber literacy.

The last group of students and staff members is advanced users of web 2.0 capabilities. These users have expectations for the educational services they receive and how those services are to be delivered to them. Services provided to these users must have seamless functionality and a “coolness” factor that draws them to fully incorporate the services into their already considerable cyber activity (Hermans and Verjans, 2009). The challenge is to provide training and informational programs that will motivate all three user groups to become knowledgeable users.

Dilemma #2: Not all users have access to the same devices.

Polk County School District is a large district containing 160 school sites with over 92,000 students enrolled. As in any large district, outfitting schools with technology occurs when they are built or renovated. Updates and replacements to that technology are then made as part of a strategic plan. In short, what is available for one school during an update year may not

be available for the next school during its update. In addition, grant opportunities have provided the latest technologies at some school sites. The result is a need for services to comply with usability across many devices and available hardware.

Dilemma #3: Where do users access and store user generated content?

According to the Polk County School District Computer User Policy, students may not store personal information on school computers. Students may not plug in personal storage devices, nor may they access “cloud storage” or email accounts beyond the firewall. So, when a student completes a task that creates content, where are they supposed to store it, retrieve it, and submit it then becomes the challenge.

Dilemma #4: How do users learn to manage and create order in a knowledge society?

With the inundation of Web 2.0 tools, educational platforms, and a variety of devices and hardware available to students organization of knowledge and user produced content becomes an insurmountable challenge. We are asking our students to use two or three different devices during a school day, to create content on multiple tools for future use, and to submit that content on multiple learning platforms. Where is the order in the chaos created by multiple options?

Hermans and Verjans (2009) ask, “[How are students, teachers, and district staff to be ‘supported across an increasingly wide range of Internet technologies [and Web 2.0 capabilities] while continuing to [receive delivery] through a reliable and secure institutional platform’?” The answer to this question for Polk School District is the personal learning environment (PLE) known in this district as the Student Portal.

The Student Portal provides students with access to a variety of services that were once accessed in multiple locations, under a variety of usernames and passwords, and authorities. The concept was to provide students with access independent of time, location, and platform to all of the services available to them in one place. The Student Portal provides tabs to student services, access to the grade server, Pinnacle Internet Viewer, to Blackboard, to Google Applications, and to Destiny, the library server (see Figure 1).

From a single point of entry, students now have the ability to function. Students may check grades, lunch and library accounts, and discipline and student health records. The students are able to access Blackboard for online course work and also Destiny, the library server to complete research or library tasks such as book reserves or renewals. In addition, access is provided to Google Applications where students have email accounts and the opportunity to use all of Google’s services, such as Google Docs, Sites, Chat, and Calendar. With this single point of entry, the students of Polk County Schools now have the ability to function, create, and communicate, and to develop 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

“In the educational environment, the virtual learning environment connects the user to resources, regulations, help, and individual, specific content” (Anderson, 2007). “Raising the awareness of the growing potential of personal (learning) environments for the lifelong learner (and for the professional or academic staff member) is a major issue when an institution wants to move towards a more student-centered digital environment” (Hermans and Verjans, 2009). The Student Portal is a step toward putting education in the hands of the learner.

## References

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Figure 1

