

AUPs and Professional Development for Principals

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It isn't every day that a principal gets to write an article with one of his former students. When I was the principal of Algonquin Regional High School from 1993 – 1998, Julie Koven was a student there. Now, more than ten years later, Julie is a professional educator. Together we have developed this article about a very timely topic: professional development for principals. To develop this topic we focused on one major issue – local acceptable use policies (AUPs) and online technologies.

Why principals? Because principals are the decision makers who ultimately hire teachers, work with teachers every day, set goals with teachers, and evaluate teachers in formative and summative ways. Their influence on the use of online technologies, directly or indirectly, is considerable. It is within this context that we try to provide at least some insight into the expanding use of online technologies in instructional planning and in the development of local AUPs.

When computers found their way into schools, the trend was to prepare policies that described what students should *not* do. These policies often included strong statements about the use of blocking and filtering within the school's network. Many of these policies also included consequences for students who violated the school's technology policies. These consequences often included the denial of access to computers and to online resources. In essence, many AUPs have really been statements of *unacceptable* use.

Things have changed since schools were first wired. Now we have websites that include educational materials far superior to many textbooks. Many of these sites are prepared and maintained by highly credible educational agencies and institutions. Often, they include podcasts and videos that bring subject matter to life. We also have sites like *The Podcast Directory*, *NPR Podcasts*, *YouTube*, *TeacherTube* and dozens of others. We have online learning management systems like Moodle and Blackboard.

The availability of online resources enables us to transform physical classrooms into learning environments that are truly available *anytime anywhere*. On the other hand, students need new skills like critical thinking and discernment. For an overview of 21st Century skills that students must acquire, please see *The Partnership for 21st Century Skills* at <http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/>. Many other sites and organizations address this topic, including the American Association of School Librarians, which recently published its AASL Standards for the 21st-Century Learner, available at <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/aasl/>. Acquisition of 21st Century skills by students requires the use of tools such as email, instant messaging, research, analysis of online resources, and online collaboration.

To truly help students acquire 21st Century skills, we must break the grip of outdated *unacceptable* use policies and develop new policies that enable students to access and evaluate resources within the context of restructured teaching. This was recently addressed by a group of educators in a graduate course entitled *Systemic Change: Curriculum, Instructional Technology and Professional Development* during the fall 2008 semester. As anyone might guess, whether or not to block YouTube was a

controversial topic within the class. Some school districts block it while others choose not to. What, then, is the message in this inconsistency? The answer really is not a technological issue. Rather, it is one of educational policy within the context of 21st Century skills like critical thinking. So let's examine YouTube within that context as we did in the Systemic Change class.

First let's consider the approach of blocking YouTube under the mistaken notion that students will not be exposed to dangerous or inappropriate material. This is the opposite of critical thinking skills that we strive to develop with our students. Consider the 2008 presidential election. Even during the primaries, YouTube included campaign videos from several candidates. Later, videos were prepared and submitted by the two major candidates. While this happened, videos were created and uploaded by others favoring one candidate or the other. Some of these videos were appropriate while others were not. Some of them were downright inaccurate and even crude. Blocking YouTube during this time eliminated an opportunity for teachers to work with students to help them evaluate Web 2.0 approaches through analysis and critical thinking. What a loss! Even allowing YouTube sites selected by teachers would deny students the opportunity to engage content critically, a skill that they *must* develop within the context of 21st Century skills.

Just as we educate our students on how to properly search the internet for authoritative sites, there is also value in teaching how to analyze the source information of YouTube videos. The same issues of internet validity and reliability are there, just for a different medium (i.e. video versus text): what kind of bias exists? Are the videos what they say they are? Can you verify the authority of the creator? Might there be any copyright violations of the video?

Much of being an effective leader involves making choices. There are some who are unwilling to entertain the possibility that computers improve teaching and academic improvement, or at least, who are afraid to try. Often, the question of wiring schools and providing students with computers and computer instruction are expensive ventures and the educational value of this seems uncertain; strong leaders must first understand the value of technology in education and then be able to transfer that understanding to the choices he or she makes in terms of allocating funds and providing support to faculty. The debate, of course, isn't whether or not to use technology, but in what ways we can implement it effectively into the curriculum. Along with understanding the *value* of technological applications, leaders need to take the time to understand their population and to recognize that students today are digital learners and we must reach them via digital methods.

So what of acceptable use policies? Instead of focusing only on the *unacceptable*, school districts should design and implement policies which explore ways for educators to incorporate the National Educational Technology Standards into their classrooms. Principals need to know these standards, understand the implications of those standards, and work with teachers to see that they are implemented. Technology tools are not an add-on to the curriculum; they are to be infused seamlessly into a curriculum which teaches learners to be critical thinkers. AUPs can focus on what will enable students and teachers to use various technologies to promote student achievement. The instructional focus on an AUP can then guide policy making.

Principals must see the school computer network and the internet as both learning tools as well as social instruments. As such, policies governing appropriate use should be consistent with the rules and regulations that govern the school community. Begin with an expectation that teachers and students will use all technology in the manner in which it is intended. Technology best practices can be seen in the use of technology to increase knowledge of subject areas, to increase communication in *and out* of the classroom, to increase research efforts, and to increase collaborative problem solving.

Yet, what happens when students do *not* use technology in the manner in which it is intended? Principals must be able to develop consequences for students who violate an acceptable use policy without denying them the tools they need to develop 21st Century skills. In this day and age, internet access for all students is a right and not a privilege and simply taking it away as a punishment is not necessarily the right answer. Educating students rather than simply restricting them is the only way to encourage the development of the skills students need to succeed in today's world. What is the right balance? Where many AUPs fall short is that they serve only as protective documents, with much of the focus being to protect the school system from misguided criticism, rather than outlining the mission of the school's technology use. Yet, protection is important. School districts *do* have the responsibility to prevent students from having the availability to view certain types of sites – pornography, gambling, weapons, etc. – while at school. How can educators be both forward-thinking AND able to protect the students from sites that are obviously not appropriate for school?

Many AUPs include in their list of unacceptable behaviors activities such as playing games, viewing pornography, or viewing sites with offensive language. Of course, violations of such a policy should result in disciplinary action. But what we must teach students to understand is that they are part of a school community and that they are stakeholders in all its components. It's important to remember that when we talk about violating school policies with regards to technology, it's not really a "technology" issue but rather a school/community/academic issue. Educators must seek ways to penalize students for breaking the AUP with consequences that aren't technology based. Including the AUP as part of the general student handbook, with similar consequences as for other behavioral violations, demonstrates that the school views the use of technology use as *part* of its educational philosophy, and not just an add-on. Whatever the consequence, the point is that the more students can see how these tools impact their future, the more responsible they can become. It's a culture shift that needs to happen.

So! What professional development is appropriate for principals? Of course attendance at conferences and workshops and taking graduate courses are always helpful. However, there are forms of professional development that cost nothing and that are very effective. For example, principals can talk with other principals whose schools do not block YouTube. How do *they* deal with revising AUPs? How are teachers using YouTube in those schools? What are some of the consequences for students' violations of *acceptable* use? Another form of free professional development for principals is the simple approach of asking teachers in their own schools how *they* would use YouTube. For some principals, this is truly a culture shift that requires a focus on *Acceptable* Use Policies that enable students to learn and

apply today's tools responsibly. For some principals a simple professional development approach might be a few hours browsing YouTube looking for the "good stuff." This might just be an eye opener. Our premise, of course, is not limited to YouTube. Our focus is really on the need for many principals to think differently about the instructional potential of technology and to follow the lead of some of their fellow principals in a culture change that fosters the development of 21st Century skills.

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