

The Hybrid Classroom: A Technological Focus on Student-Centered Learning

Two years ago I was challenged by my principal to increase attendance in my English class. He said, **“We’ve gotta make school somewhere they want to be.** Can you make learning fun? Can you fix our attendance problem?” I didn’t know if I could at the time. I think since then, I’ve found a solution for my school and schools across the state.

In the daytime I’m a mild-mannered teacher at an alternative school in downtown Raleigh, NC. It has about 150 at-risk youths, and its average daily attendance is somewhere around 60%. From experience, I know that attendance is the number one obstacle for these students –it’s a side effect of every other obstacle they face in life. **I wondered what could be done about attendance in the face of drug abuse, gang membership, low basic skills, and even homelessness.**

I felt challenged, and I wanted to improve my school and help my students. I researched games, and I started using a digital projector for fun, team learning lessons. I also integrated a hands-on *aquaponics* project into the course. Class *was* fun, but attendance didn’t increase. This was mainstream thinking, and I was convinced I had to get outside the box.

Desperate to try anything to move the average attendance numbers, I spread the word that I would shave the word ‘nerdy’ in the back of my head and run up and down Lake Wheeler Road if 85% of my students showed up on an upcoming Friday. I am a white teacher in an African American school and

Weird Al’s ‘White and Nerdy’ had just been released; the kids thought this would be great fun. They were pumped about it, and they really talked it up. I started to let my shaved head get prickly so “Nerdy” would be really legible, but on the designated day we just didn’t make the numbers.

The promise to make a fool out of myself was all I could do, was as far as I could go. I couldn’t promise any more, and I didn’t have anything else to put on the line. I was stumped. I realized that I didn’t have the power to change the attendance rate at school –it’s a distinct possibility that my students’ attendance is out of their control because their lives are out of their control.

I realized I would need a new approach, and I really started to think outside the box. How could I make attendance a non-issue? How could I take this obstacle off the table for my students?

Technology was clearly the answer, but at the time I didn’t have the knowledge or the skills. I taught myself web design over the summer of 2007. By the next semester, I had a website up and running that I think will eventually change the way we approach education in North Carolina. **The website, quite simply, contains the class in its entirety.** It represented hundreds of hours of work at the time because I was self taught and learning. But when it was finished it had 90 days of direct instruction tied to the SCOS and copyright violation free due to a handy bit of html password coding. It continues to evolve, and now it is tied to Blackboard, which is what the district uses as a Content Management System. Blackboard has features like Tests and Discussion Boards so it makes assessment easy. The website, however, utilizes web 2.0 tools for direct instruction, collaborative web tools for student interaction, and just about every

interesting, innovative, annotative, tool I could get my hands on.

This is not simply an online class with students working silently at computers for 90 minutes like Novanet (yuck!).

This class is an online hybrid, combining the best of both online learning and face to face learning.

I came back to school a man on a mission. In my room I already had 5 computers on the school network. I got 5 more computers donated from UNC Hospital. They were old, but they ran Microsoft Office, Audacity, Sketchup, and a few other simple, free programs. I moved desks to form 3 distinct stations –the exploration station, the creation station, and the sharing session. Classes would be entirely in 3 groups of 5 students with no whole-class lecture. Each group, a little contained pod, would start at one of these sessions, rotating every third of the period. In this way, nobody ever sits still for 90 minutes on the same task. At-risk youth don't do well sitting still for 90 minutes. The exploration station focuses on exploring information online and using web 2.0 resources. The creation station focuses on using the information from the exploration station to 'create' products that show learning. And the sharing session, which is centered on the digital projector with a wireless mouse and keyboard that can be passed around, focuses on teams of students learning together to discuss issues and learn in teams.

An early issue I faced was how to get the products from the creation station computers, which weren't online, to me. Small flash drives donated from a local electronics outlet, Tiger Direct, solved the problem. Right away I saw that students could email work to me from the computers that were online. They made gmail accounts the third day of class. A happy side effect of our system

is that **the entire class is paperless** – we've saved thousands of dollars in paper over the last couple of years. **We don't use a textbook either**, which will be a big money saver for school districts who adopt this model. Another side effect for the kids is that they are learning the benefits of email –they don't lose work! If I'm missing an assignment and a student claims to have turned it in, I say "prove it." The student can go to gmail, open *sent mail*, and look up the day and session the assignment was sent. **This has all of the benefits of a bulky portfolio with none of the hindrance that a bulky hard copy offers.**

Students who have a hard time reading can read along with text to speech sites, and many assignments require students to record audio in *audacity*, which is a free download. Students use headsets in class to listen to audio books and record their own audio, and English comes alive, leaving the printed page in the dust. Teachertube gives students a chance to see excerpts of plays, and mp3's give them a chance to hear poetry performed. In a way, **the website has become, for me, the embodiment of the evolution of education.**

Another important evolution this class exemplifies is the online grade book. I put the grade book on Google docs so students can see exactly what they're missing and how they're doing at any given time. I ask parents to check their kids' grades once per week, and they take responsibility for their child's performance. In this way we share the responsibility of student success. There is no personal information like names on the document of course, but having grades online makes students responsible for those little numbers. It's better than locking the grades away in a little green notebook and then asking

kids to be responsible for them –how does a kid do that, exactly?

My only problem the first semester was that my students, poor, at-risk, inner-city youths, didn't have computers at home. To solve this issue, I found The Kramden Institute (www.kramden.org). The Kramden Institute is a nonprofit organization that gives refurbished computers to hard working kids who don't have computers in the home. They give away nice computer systems with Windows XP running at around 2.5 GHz, which is fast, and Kramden provides free technical support to its recipients for as long as they're in school. I became the Director of Education for Kramden a month or so after getting computers for my students. Now I find students all over the state and help them cross the digital divide. It's a great organization, and I encourage everyone I meet to check it out online.

At this point my students had computers at home, donated USB drives, their assignments were online, and they had 24 hour access to their grades in 'real time.' It was time to really settle in and pilot the program.

A year later, the classroom looks like a dream. I've read Harry Wong's book, "The First Days of School" about three times, and it's amazing what the class looks like by day 15. It's about 90% student driven. The kids come in on time, and while I still hear teachers in the hallway begging kids to hurry up and get started, my students are quietly writing in their journals. Students in the sharing session start the online stopwatch, which the digital projector counts down for everyone (<http://www.online-stopwatch.com>).

Seven minutes later, the timer goes off. The kids put their journals away and begin to work in their stations. The

timer is set for 25 minutes, and a second browser tab is opened for a second timer set to 26 minutes. The students in the sharing session read the instructions out loud, passing the mouse and keyboard around while tracking their reading with a laser pointer in case I need to look up and pronounce a word or in case anyone loses his or her place. While they are working together to finish the instructions for the session, I'm floating to the exploration station and creation station to make sure everyone is on task and answering questions. I'm sometimes involved with the sharing session, but for the most part it runs on its own. The timer goes off again, and the students know they have a minute until it's time to switch. Students email their assignments from the exploration station, and work at the creation station gets saved on flash drives. Then the 'move' signal buzzes, and everyone rotates. The same times get put on the timer for the next sessions, and the class continues to operate consistently and smoothly.

Sure, 60% attendance is still a problem for the school. But **the solution isn't to make the students come to school. The solution is to take down the wall –to not allow attendance to be a barrier for these kids. Now they can be successful no matter what their situation is –the responsibility is theirs, but the opportunity, the possibility, is in their hands.** They might not be able to control their wild home lives, but they can control how they do in class.

"How can one offer lessons online that are as effective as a teacher in class?" is a question I get from some of the older teachers, some who are slow to see change as beneficial. What they don't understand is that the internet is more than just a place to keep text. With the development of web 2.0 and now 3.0, direct instruction is available

through avatars, screen tutorials, and plenty of other lecture-presentation tools if lecture is really the way you want to go. Personally, I question the value of a lecture for more than ten minutes at a time, but the beauty of technology is that there is room for every kind of teaching style.

Personally, I like discussion. And when it comes to discussion, there are LOTS of places students can discuss issues online with each other. Blackboard and a free, open source product, Moodle, both come to mind. Online content tools for the hybrid model are numerous, and every semester my course content gets better and better, largely because I improve the wheel in my planning period; I don't reinvent it every year.

I've recently presented web 2.0 and the hybrid classroom at the *North Carolina Technology in Education Conference* in Raleigh, NC, and it's my goal to tell more people how to benefit the education industry by taking down the attendance barrier, by teaching and using technology, by saving money on textbooks and paper, and by ensuring education keeps up with our evolving society. I'm available to consult and can be contacted at mike.shumake@ncmail.net.



About the Author

Mike Shumake is North Carolina's Virtual teacher of the year and has been an educator for almost ten years. He has a Master's in School Administration from NCSU, and the bulk of his career has been spent in alternative schools with at-risk youth. Mr. Shumake is also the Director of Education for the Kramden Institute, a nonprofit organization that gives computers to hard working kids in need.

I have a dream that one day I will become a veterinarian. I want to help animals. I want to help the people that have really sick pets. It doesn't matter if you have the money. The only thing that matters is to help any animal. It's not about the money; the only important thing about an Animal Clinic is to help animals live.

I want to become a veterinarian because I think it is cool to work with animals. Another reason is because being a veterinarian is not just to help animals. Animals are like part of your family. They are like a brother, sister or a true friend.

This is my Dream!!

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www.atriskeducation.net