Digital Tools You Need to Know

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When we heard the theme of this issue, we got excited. All of us have used various digital tools over our teaching careers. Some of us are old enough, and have been teaching long enough, to remember the wonder from teachers and students alike as technology came into our classrooms. When the first interactive whiteboards arrived, projectors, document cameras, tablets, laptops, Chromebooks . . . our classrooms changed. With those additions came digital tools that we’d examine, hoping they would add to our classroom and not just be a box we could check off, verifying we’d tried something new. For many of us, the use of technology in our classrooms is now embedded in our daily lives. We hope by sharing three of our favorite digital tools with you, you might find one that you haven’t used or it might inspire you to use one in a different way.

Padlet

(KS)
Technology has become an integral part of the school day over the past ten years. Looking at a typical day in my seventh-grade classroom this year, Google Classroom, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Skype, and more all might be used for a variety of reasons. Students switch between devices like Chromebooks, iPads, student phones, and their notebooks as seamlessly as breathing. These kids have grown up in this world. They vacillate between print books, ebooks, and audiobooks, choosing whatever happens to meet their needs. One of my favorite tools to use in our classroom has been Padlet.

My favorite type of tech tool is one that’s simple to use, free, and brings my classroom community closer.

Originally named Wallwisher, Padlet is simply an online bulletin board. I set up a new “wall”, give the students the link, and we’re ready to begin. While there are many online tutorials on how to create a Padlet, it truly is a pretty simple endeavor. One example of the way we use this in our classroom is an “It’s Monday” Padlet where kids take a selfie with the book they’re currently reading and write up a description. I share the link to the Padlet wall with the entire middle school and everyone from my principal to the tech director to the eighth-grade math teacher posts their current reads, as do all of the students in the building. An anchor chart in the classroom holds the URLs for each week so that kids can go back and look up reading recommendations from previous Padlets when looking for their next book to read.

Padlet has also been a place for my students to respond to a class read-aloud. Whether it’s a picture book, a novel, or an article, I create a new wall and ask them to leave their thoughts. Squares with students’ names and reflections pop up in a grid. Leaving the comment option turned on, kids can read other reflections from their classmates, whether they are in the same language arts period or not, and build onto those thoughts.

Padlet can also be a place for you to curate resources. When looking into a unit on the impact of plastic on the environment, I set up a Padlet for my students to share resources as they researched online. This became our landing spot for the unit: links to articles, videos, infographics, images, and more were all stored in one place for all students to access.
These options for using a resource like Padlet are simply a jumping off point; we've used it for so much more. Exit slips, reflections, poetry curation, book blurbs, and more have all made it onto our walls. We even added to a Padlet from home—photos of students at home, sharing what they were doing, were posted to the link when we had an unexpected snow day. My favorite type of tech tool is one that’s simple to use, free, and brings my classroom community closer. Padlet does just that.

Libby (Overdrive) and Hoopla

(CM)
Our school is in our first year of one-to-one technology, and I have found that there are several go-to apps for class, but the ones that I recommend to my students more than any other would be Libby and Hoopla, our public library’s ebook borrowing apps.

Both apps are similar in that they offer both ebooks and e-audiobooks to borrow with the use of a library card. Borrowing is available 24-7 with an internet connection; materials can be downloaded and accessed without internet access, though. The specifics of borrowing and what's available is determined by your library, but generally speaking, Hoopla allows a certain total number of items to be borrowed per month, while you can only borrow a certain number of items at a time from Libby (but if you return what you have finished, you can borrow something else). Libby has finite numbers of each title, leaving you to request a hold on something that is currently unavailable. By contrast, Hoopla has unlimited numbers of each item—so if you wanted your students to ALL borrow a particular title you found in Hoopla, they could all borrow it at once. Books can be borrowed up to 14 days (Libby) or 21 days (Hoopla) before they return themselves. Both apps make suggestions for related reading material, so they are a great resource to help students find new titles to check out. Hoopla also has available movies and TV shows and an incredible collection of comic books and graphic novels, but they also have a lot of mature material that students could get to easily—unless you have them set up on the Kids Mode setting.

While my students report that they prefer print books, many appreciate the fact that ebook borrowing is instant gratification (unless they get stuck on that hold list on Libby). Even though my students are fortunate to have two branches of our county library system within our rural district boundaries, it’s not always easy to get to one or the other if you don’t live within walking distance. This opens up the public library resources to our students in a way they didn’t have before.

Anchor

(CS)
I have a handful of students who are obsessed with sports radio. One kid’s dad works as the announcer for a local university’s hockey team. He goes to each game with his dad. Every Monday he tells me all about the game and about how his dad announced the contest. His dream is to have a nationally syndicated sports radio show when he grows up.

When he shared his dream with me, I don’t think he realized that we’d be able to set him up with a podcast that would sync to both Google Play and Apple Podcast in a matter of minutes. Using the app Anchor, we were able to get his show off and running in no time. We didn’t have to worry about RSS feeds or what site to have host his show. Anchor takes the complexity and anxiety out of podcasting and allows kids to do what they want to do: make an awesome show.

Every Monday morning my future sports broadcasting student walks into class and huddles in front of an iPad with his buddies. They browse ESPN.com looking for stories to cover on their show. They have created more than 20 episodes, and each episode is thoughtful and engaging.

Padlet, Libby and Hoopla, Anchor—if you had mentioned these tools to us ten years ago, we’d have looked at you with confusion. Today, our students gravitate toward them. These tools enhance our lessons in the classroom, connect our students to the outside world, let them share their voices, and give them access to books instantly. Technology is considered a “game-changer” by many, and through these tools and more, we can see limitless possibilities.
Donalyn Miller, Colby Sharp, Cindy Minnich, and Katherine Sokolowski are the facilitators of the The Nerdy Book Club blog (www.nerdybookclub.com), a community-based blog that invites teachers, librarians, authors, illustrators, booksellers, and families to celebrate the artists who write and illustrate for young people and share ideas for engaging children with reading through their caring adults.

Donalyn Miller is a former upper elementary and middle school teacher in Northeast Texas, and author of several books on engaging children with reading, including The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child (Jossey-Bass, 2009).

Colby Sharp is an elementary school teacher in Parma, Michigan. He coaches middle school football, facilitates the annual Nerd Camp literacy Ed. Camp conference with his wife, Alaina, and blogs about his classroom at Sharpread (https://sharpread.wordpress.com/).

Cindy Minnich is a high school teacher in Central Pennsylvania and currently serves on the ALAN board. She lives with her husband, son, and pets among the “decorative” stacks of books and board games.

Katherine Sokolowski has taught for 21 years—from kindergarten through seventh grade—and currently teaches seventh grade in Monticello, Illinois. Her thoughts about the power of relationships to engage readers and writers have appeared on NPR and Choice Literacy.