

The Changing Role and Purpose of the School Website

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The role, purpose and importance of the school website is changing at pace in those schools globally that have moved to a digital operational base, are on track to normalise the use of the digital throughout and which are rapidly creating their own, unique, tightly integrated digital ecosystem.

The digital evolution that is transforming every facet of these schools is profoundly impacting those school's websites, moving the website from its traditional peripheral position to being core and critical to the school's everyday operations, its teaching, growth, evolution and enhanced performance and productivity.

The time has come when all schools and education authorities need to recognise that change, and the profound implications that flow at both the school and education authority level.

Moreover they would be as well to grasp the critical reality that with society normalising the everyday use of the digital, digital transformation and the movement of the digital schools away from the loosely coupled, segmented, almost silo like, organisation to a form that is evermore tightly integrated the part played by the school website fundamentally changes, both in nature and standing.

In the traditional highly segmented, insular paper based school the website has been viewed as but one of the many largely discrete parts of the school, largely peripheral to the everyday teaching. In many instances it has been window dressing, sometimes very high quality window dressing but in the main it has done little to enhance the pedagogy or student learning.

Crucially the online experience has been viewed as separate from and lesser than the physical.

In marked contrast within digitally based schools an apposite, dynamic, ever evolving, working website is central to virtually every operation, including the school's 24/7/365 teaching.

Indeed without that website schools cannot create their desired digital ecosystem and successfully realise their shaping educational and digital vision.

Try and imagine how organisations like Apple, Amazon, News Ltd or the Tax Office could operate without their websites and you'll begin to appreciate how critical they are to the workings and growth of digitally based schools.

That fundamental difference needs to be understood and the discussions begun at the school and system level on what is required to move forward.

As Westerman and his colleagues observe (Westerman et al, 2014) societies that have normalised the use of the digital no longer differentiate between the online and physical experience.

If, as some appear to be doing, the school wants to remain as a traditional paper based, silo like organisation focussed on readying its students for paper based external examinations those discussions on the website are not needed.

If however your school's desire is normalise the use of the digital and create an ever evolving digital school ecosystem that will educate each child for today you do need to have the conversation and decide what is to be done.

Interestingly ask any school leader or educational administrator why an apposite website is critical to the successful whole school embrace of BYOT or the evolution of the school's ecosystem and it is likely only a handful could tell you why.

Moreover ask a software house to create a website for a digital school and it is likely even the best and more prescient will still prepare a polished offering for the traditional mode of schooling.

The desire with this article is begin remedying those shortcomings and to highlight the core, multifaceted role of the school website - and its associated digital communications suite - in the digital transformation and evolution of schooling.

The Traditional Website

For the last 15-20 years the school website has been largely peripheral to the school's everyday workings and in particular its teaching. It has been primarily a static source of information, a marketing tool and possibly a gateway to the inner, seemingly secret teaching of the school that necessitated password entry. The closed classroom door was retained when the school went online. In many education authorities globally the websites have been 'cookie' cut' with their operations tightly controlled by the central office bureaucrats and the external ICT experts. The schools were invariably given little say in their form even at a time when schools were being given greater decision making and obliged to shape their own growth. Even today at least one Australian education authority still prohibits schools having their own website, while other authorities and their ICT controllers continue to micro manage the nature and workings of the 'school's' site.

Invariably within the school an individual has had responsibility for maintaining the school site, ensuring it was not 'spoilt' by other staff, although that said one will find schools where the different operational units, like the library or student support services, also operate their own website, separate to that of the school.

In many schools, particularly the independent the site is maintained by the school's public relations/marketing unit, ensuring the desired image, with the apposite Pepsodent smiles is always to the fore.

Do a quick scan of a cross section of school websites, primary and secondary, state and independent – including the award winners - and you'll likely find most are still primarily sources of information, some very polished, some very dated. Undertake a Google search of the 'purpose' or 'importance' of school websites and you'll find even the more reasoned such that by University of Florida - <http://fcit.usf.edu/websites/chap1/chap1.htm>- still underscore the largely peripheral, information providing role.

The choice of the award winning sites appears to have far more to do with looks, design finesse and interactivity than functionality and how the facility contributes to the realisation of the school's shaping educational and digital vision.

Significantly most will also be closely 'guarded' sites with community access to any teaching materials invariably restricted by password.

Emergence of the 'working' website

From the mid 2000's as the first of the schools globally moved to a digital operational base and began their digital evolution one has seen in all those schools the on-going transformation and evolution of the school's website, that as indicated by Lee (2013) mirrored the school's evolutionary path, and which saw its shift from a peripheral to a core role.

The website, like those in all other digitally based organisations, plays a central, multi-faceted role, assisting enhance the school's culture and ecosystem, furthering the school's growth and evolution, enabling the school to interface with the networked world, being used integrally in every facet of the schools' 24/7/365 teaching, the integration of all school operations, educational and administrative and the on-going enhancement of the school's efficiency, effectiveness and productivity.

The website increasingly became the interface for the school's community and a medium that facilitated the integration of all the school's operations in and outside the school walls.

In contrast to the largely constant peripheral offerings these are dynamic working sites that are being updated and added to virtually every minute of the day by all within the school's community, be they the children, the teachers, the parents or community members.

The focus is very much on the work to be done, educational and administrative and using the site - and the associated digital services - to do that work as expeditiously, simply, effectively and productively as possible, and where apposite to have the technology simultaneously perform multiple roles and to automate the tasks at hand.

While rightly concerned to project a professional image these are 24/7 /365 worksites where sections might at any times appear as messy as the physical classroom. If that is so, so be it.

Look for example at the websites of The Gulf Harbour School (NZ) - <http://www.gulpharbour.school.nz> - or that of Broulee Public School at - <http://www.brouleepublicschool.nsw.edu.au> - and you'll soon appreciate what is meant by 'working' websites. These sites, like those in the other schools that have normalised the use of the digital, employ a template service that makes it easy for all the teachers and students and indeed interested parents and community members to publish to the site. Long gone is the sole publisher controlling all uploads, but not a quality controller astutely ensuring unnecessary mess is removed.

They are moreover multi-purpose entities where the website provides seamless access to a plethora of online facilities and services, removing the

divide between the school's physical and online offerings. While reference has been made to the 'website' that is partly a misnomer because as apparent in both the above mentioned sites there are links to an ever evolving digital communications suite that includes such diverse services as an emailed school communiqué, an online survey facility, advice on new teaching programs or resources, the online advisement of student absence, Twitter, Facebook and the facility to instantly inform parents of a critical incident, like a death. Indeed as a colleague has suggested it might be opportune to find another term to describe the role played by the website in a digital school.

The sites are modular in nature with the schools using a mix of free and leased online services, able to quickly discard superseded 'modules' and replace them with a new more apposite 'module'.

Critically both these sites are open for anyone to view. The parents, grandparents miles away, interested educators, education authorities or prospective parents all have open access to the day's teaching, being able to readily view and if they wish comment upon the work. Yes the schools have had to do their homework and have permission to reveal the children and the work but that is just part of operating within a digital and networked world, collaborating with one's community.

The closed doors are opened and the teachers and children can with pride reveal the work done.

Simultaneously, and without any extra effort by the teachers or students the school are using the website – through the medium of the likes of blogs and wikis – to enhance the teaching and learning, to daily enhance the school's ecology, to collaborate with and inform the student's homes, to account for the school's work, to receive instant and continual feedback and vitally to automatically promote the school.

Of note is the number of parents globally who now make their choice of school after scrutinising the open working websites of the digital pathfinders; Net Generation parents who can explore the natural workings of the school without the PR spin and experience first hand the unique digital ecosystem the school has created. Going is the need for the specialist Web/PR unit.

They very much appreciate the school website provides an invaluable actual the insight into the school's thinking, aspirations and daily workings that can not be replicated by even the best marketers.

The website affirms by virtue of its intimate ties with the school's total operations, that the school and its teachers are working within a higher order tightly integrated digital ecology that is simultaneously addresses the many variables that enhance student learning.

Conclusion

This type of school ecology and culture, and the use of a website that will further its growth takes, as the many previous articles underscore, years of astute concerted effort to create.

That said if you want your school to create that unique, ever evolving, digitally based ever higher order ecosystem your school too will need to build into your planning from the outset the creation of the apposite website and complementary digital communications suite.

Bibliography

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