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tech.life@school | Online 'campus' for educators to meet, mentor, talk, develop

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Need a cozy place to meet with colleagues, teach your students, enhance your professional knowledge and get support? You don't have to leave home to get Tapped In.

Tapped In (www.ti2.org), owned and operated by SRI International, a research-and-development institute, is an online international community of educators, designed to promote teacher professional development, in a rich Web-based environment. Membership is free to any education professional interested in leading discussions around educational topics, attending online classes, mentoring and being mentored, and participating in learning projects.

The metaphor for this virtual space is a campus. Major organizations have their own buildings. Teachers may set up private classrooms in the Student Activities Center Building, where communication can be limited to invited guests and where students can learn the skills they will need to participate effectively in online communities.

All members can set up virtual offices, public or private discussion groups, and classrooms. They can participate in threaded discussions, text-based chat and private messaging, graphical white-board posting and brainstorming, and they can leave "sticky notes" for visitors. Conversation transcripts are e-mailed automatically to participants.

Not ready to set up shop? Just explore or join in. An After School Online (ASO) events calendar lists meetings and workshops, which generally run an hour. Among last month's many offerings were tours for new users, Writing for Webheads, introductions for new and pre-service teachers, a New Search and Retrieval Tools workshop, and forums for school administrators, social studies and science teachers, and librarians.

Each time I have visited the Tapped In environment, I have been impressed with the friendliness of the volunteer staff I have met in the reception area. One of the most experienced of the volunteer experts is B.J. Berquist, an art teacher at the Loysville Youth Development Center, a residential male juvenile correctional facility in central Pennsylvania, who has been involved with Tapped In since the beginning.

Berquist discussed some of the Tapped In professional development programs. In the Arts and Corrections discussion, Berquist and her colleagues share information about programs that work with children in correctional facilities and alternative programs.

"Without an online community, this sharing would never have been possible," Berquist said. "In some ways, all teachers are isolated when they close their classroom doors. They don't talk to another adult most of the day."

Tapped In gives all teachers the opportunity to get professional development whenever they want it. But correctional and alternative teachers especially appreciate the connections.

"I can talk to my peers and share success stories... and I get support from the community," Berquist said.

In other professional discussions, Glenn Bull, of the University of Virginia, and Julie Springer, coordinator of teacher programs at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, are using a Tapped In forum to discuss the uses of digital storytelling in the visual arts and to plan a weeklong summer seminar at the National Gallery.

Tapped In's tenants include Pepperdine, Azusa Pacific, and Alabama A&M Universities, the National Educational Technology Trends Study, and ACCESS, a California group for alternative schools. According to Berquist, Milwaukee Public Schools currently holds all professional development opportunities online.

When Tapped In launched its new interface in April, executive director Mark Schlager feared losing some of the 17,000 members who had to abandon the old interface.

"Within the first nine months, we were back to 10,000 members," Schlager said. "There was no external motive; the members simply find value in it."

Schlager was also pleased with the "amazing response" to the site's new features - threaded discussion, file-sharing, and the ability for educators to create and manage their own groups. He noted that educators who already use online courseware such as Black Board use Tapped In's space for after-course support or for team project work because of its unlimited seat potential and its ability to support community online.

Tapped In is completely free. Berquist assures even the most technophobic teacher that heavy-duty tech knowledge is unnecessary here: "Every discipline is represented in this professional and social place. You merely need to be able to log in and type for access to the international educational community."

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