# Introduction

*by Mark Gura*

Rose first showed me her pioneering work in the use of author web sites a few years back when I was preparing to give a keynote presentation for the New York Reading Association. I was impressed with the huge potential this approach offered; it immediately clicked for me that this was the very thing for that vast majority of teachers out there who would like to find an easy way to bring technology into their classrooms. Using author web sites encourages the use of technology without the usual disincentives: the need for extensive professional development; the need for a significant influx of hardware, software, and peripheral devices; and most off-putting, the need to take a major detour from the familiar curriculum that they use with confidence. Using author sites eliminates all that while allowing a new and exciting dimension to be brought into the classroom. I could see these advantages instantly, and apparently so did my "non-techie" audience.

A few years back, before retirement, I was the director of The Office of Instructional Technology for the New York City Department of Education. The office served the city's eighty thousand teachers, who in turn taught 1.1 million students. My responsibility was to provide guidance, resources, instructional support, and professional development in the integration of technology across the curriculum. Because of the scope of this mandate, we learned to bypass all resources and practices that didn't resonate strongly with teachers. We avoided resources that required a significant outlay of funds and those that took time to set up. Those that required frequent maintenance were avoided, too. Instead, we turned our attention solely to practices that teachers could adopt within the limiting parameters of their jobs and that offered them real advantages in teaching and learning.

## MINIMAL EQUIPMENT AND TECH SKILLS REQUIRED

Author web sites, which are *free,* are a perfect low-risk sandbox in which to play, try things out, learn, and adopt. Teachers who have access to a working computer with a connection to the Internet already have pretty much all they need to use them. Sure, some of these sites offer media items that may require the download of a plug-in or player (nothing hard to accomplish, just read and follow simple directions), but author sites are generally created by sophisticated webmasters who see their mission as providing clients with a resource that will run on almost anything. Thus, the sites are designed so that even if every item isn't viewed or heard at optimum capacity, they are still displayed at a level that will support their appreciation. Consequently, if a classroom computer runs a relatively up-to-date browser, not necessarily the most recent

one, and is supported by a connection that approaches broadband, the overwhelming majority of author web sites will deliver their magic just fine.

Assuming that a teacher has some very basic computer and technology skills—like turning the computer on, manipulating a mouse, and opening and closing files—then there are very few things to learn in order to make author web sites a centerpiece of instruction. After launching a browser and finding and accessing an author's web site, the rest of the experience requires simply

1. Reading the directions on the web site (simple commands like "click here," "back," and "next," generally accompanied by arrows or other visual cues)

2. Following those directions

3. Left-clicking a mouse

Really, that's about it! Of course there are always a few other things that can be done. Author sites can be bookmarked, for instance, and their URLs can be e-mailed to students, parents, or colleagues. But generally, these tasks can also be accomplished with the simplest of commands, developed with the non–technically inclined in mind. These web sites are truly part of the new user-friendly digital literacy landscape.

Consequently, whatever professional development is offered relating to the use of author web sites has much less to do with the acquisition of technology skills than it does with using the sites' instructional resources. Staff development in the use of author web sites provides a wonderful bonus opportunity to discuss core instructional ideas that have a direct impact on literacy instruction, for example, the value and methodology of author study, the relationship between self-directed reading and writing, and the use of media.

## IT'S SAFE

One of the common "yeah, buts" one hears about the use of the web as an instructional resource has to do with the fear that somehow web sites will put youngsters in jeopardy. And in fact, there are web sites with very unwholesome content that we do want to prevent youngsters from visiting. Author web sites, however, are generally resources that educators can use with confidence. These sites are authorized by and maintained for professional authors who fully understand the responsibility of keeping them appropriate for their young audience. Furthermore, a preferred manner of using these sites in the classroom is during whole-group instruction, in which the web destination the class visits is controlled by the teacher, who then moderates the students' experience of exploring it with an eye toward appropriateness and quality.

## INSTRUCTION AND CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

When it first became possible to bring the magic of computer technology into the classroom, many eager educators adopted the one-to-one environment—that is, one laptop for every student—as the ideal, exclusively relevant deployment model. Now that the dust is clearing on the classroom tech revolution and we've had time to reflect on how it has played out, it is becoming clear that one-to-one, as valuable as it may be in some situations, is just one model among several. In fact, its exclusive deployment throws off the balance of many teaching and learning factors. Think of it this way: in the course of a balanced educational

experience, a classroom will have youngsters working independently at times, in small groups at others, and at other times still as a unified whole group. The class will toggle back and forth between modalities as the needs of learners shift.

The whole-group mode of instruction is a uniquely valuable approach to classroom technology use. Think about a scenario in which the teacher projects a large image for the whole class to work from, allowing students to view and participate as a group in web site navigation decisions. This approach, in which the whole class is able to view the same screen, is far more economical and practical logistically than individual instruction, with the teacher attempting to monitor and scaffold every student's navigation of a site. Anyone who has had the privilege of observing a skilled literacy teacher doing a book walk with a group of elementary students will recognize the connection. The teacher holds up a big book for students to admire, a literary talisman that is examined and admired before the book is formally "read" from more traditionally scaled, individual copies. This is very similar to a whole-group activity in which the focus of attention is a single, large image of a web site. This approach to classroom technology use can support a range of tech-based activities across the grades, wherever an author's web site has items of high value to offer. It has applicability across the curriculum and at every grade level.

Another benefit of this approach, and one that will ensure that teachers see classroom technology use as easy and nonthreatening, is how it relates to classroom management. With the teacher at the mouse of the single display (likely an LCD projector, large-screen monitor, or interactive whiteboard), few of the distracting behaviors that can get in the way of the flow of a well-planned lesson are likely to creep in. With the teacher asking for suggestions (by the traditional raising of hands and sharing with the group) about where to navigate the group's attention on the web sites being used, or calling individuals up to the mouse to take their turn at control, in no way has the interactivity been compromised. It has simply been adapted to the shared-activity mode of instruction that is a tried-and-true portion of the overall school experience.

## WHY THIS BOOK IS IMPORTANT

Even though we are into the third decade of the field of instructional technology, technology integration remains a largely unfulfilled ideal in many schools. With the advent of reasonably priced and easily maintained personal computers, ever increasing access to broadband Internet service, and an exploding body of highly valuable web-based content, technology use across the curriculum really should have become the norm by now. Technologies that have positively transformed all realms of intellectual activity outside of education still remain something of an unattainable holy grail inside our classrooms.

All who weigh in on the subject—informed practitioner, policy maker, or plain old concerned citizen—agree that the time for pointing to pockets of success or examples of integration models is long past. So much work has been done in this field; it can no longer be said that we are still trying to figure out how to adapt technology for education. Search the web! The evidence and knowledge is there and in such quantities as to quell any doubts or questions.

Teachers from colleges of education to K–12 classrooms have called for the inclusion of technology as an important part of teaching and learning in the 21st century. A glance at the web sites of important professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association, and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics show a solidarity of interest among leading educators in improving students' proficiency in the new literacies of information and communication technology.

We understand that the use of technology will make the school experience more relevant for youngsters growing up in the current intellectual environment, fostering greater engagement and motivation, and likely resulting in improved attendance and graduation rates. The question is: What's needed to nudge this snowball over the rim of the mountain? What push will set it in motion so that the natural and inevitable law of gravity can take over?

Rather than set up pilot programs with specially trained teachers—the "classroom of the future" approach that has so often been taken and has produced so very little in the way of systemic change—a different tack will likely produce the effect we've sought for so long. What's needed is to develop a critical mass of technology-using teachers—teachers who make technology part and parcel of what they do as naturally as they might distribute a set of books to their class, direct their students to read a passage, and then conduct a whole-group discussion to clarify what's been read. Once this critical mass of non-techie teachers who are comfortably using technology has become a reality, the rest of the technology integration puzzle will likely fall into place. Classroom technology use will go from being extraordinary to ordinary.

To achieve this critical mass, what's needed are rock solid, perennial, "must do, tried and true" classroom activities, practices that require an amount of professional development and preparation that the vast rank-and-file mass of teachers find reasonable and doable as part of their professional lives. These must be practices with threshold levels of technology that are accessible and not intimidating.

Author study is, in my mind, one of those "killer app" key entry point practices poised and ready to make broad-based technology integration a reality. Author web sites are a perfect tech resource; they are hyper user-friendly, free, and ubiquitous. They fit into the existing curriculum easily. They enrich the experience of students and teachers tremendously. They are good to go tomorrow or, better yet, today! This is a tech application that appeals to all stakeholders: teachers, students, parents, and administrators.

Furthermore, author web sites, with their embedded media items bring the new life of books into classrooms that otherwise would present an antiquated print-only understanding of them. The *way* of books, and the world around them, has changed. While the centerpiece of their existence remains a hard-copy presence, the orbit surrounding books, particularly the connection to authors, is very much a web-based experience. Author sites illustrate this in important ways that are easy to grasp.

For all these reasons and more, digital author study—facilitated through the use of author web sites—is likely to be adopted by content area leaders who will sooner or later come to realize that it offers easy-to-achieve, innovation-driven change. It's a change that profoundly improves the classrooms they are responsible for supporting and holding accountable for success. This is important because it is the leaders and supervisors of core content area instruction that have the power and authority to make change happen in our schools when it comes to the adoption of technology. It will never be easy for instructional technologists to lobby for deep changes in the content area classrooms of our schools. However, instructional leaders in the areas of English language arts, science, math, social studies, and others, in partnership with supportive instructional technologists, can make such changes happen easily and quickly. Author web sites are a ready-to-go resource that can be tapped for this immediately.

## WHO GETS TURNED ON TO LITERACY BY AUTHOR WEB SITES?

Not only teachers, but above all students will love using author web sites for key literacy activities. These sites are more than simply motivating and engaging; they are enticing. Students who haven't been able to demonstrate comprehension skills and appropriate literacy

responses—couldn't answer rote questions in a basal textbook about plot, sequencing, style, or theme when only permitted to use print materials—suddenly light up with wonderful "got it" smiles when visiting author sites. With focused technology use, students properly guided by tech-savvy teachers are supported to deal successfully with the very same literacy components that may have eluded them continually in spoken text-only lessons.

Students who've never responded to their teacher's writing prompts, even though they may have been masterfully modeled with the teacher's personal writing, begin to eagerly write when the prompts come from an author they encounter online. Highly popular authors such as T. A. Barron, Jean Craighead George, or Judy Blume offer many such opportunities through their web sites.

Students who never contribute to classroom discussion because of self-consciousness about talking in front of others, whether due to low English language proficiency or just plain shyness, are happily productive contributors when they can participate in an online discussion about an author's work. These same students' faces often light up when they see their comments displayed on the discussion board of, for example, author Gregory Maguire's web site—just one of many ways that authors' sites successfully enfranchise and enroll students in the circle of readers and writers.

English Language Learners who may only hear English spoken in the classroom, not in their homes, become attentive and excited as they see pictures of authors at their age online in author site galleries. They can also follow video presentations online and access web sites of authors who write in their native language.

Once students enter these sites, they are presented with some of the potentially best content to be found. This book offers a starting point for educators interested in understanding and tapping that potential.

## OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

In Chapter 1, the basic components of author sites are reviewed and their direct application to instruction is discussed. Chapter 2 focuses on the web site of Eric Carle, a favorite classroom author, and gives a detailed understanding of how the components of author sites fit well within required standards-based curriculum. Chapter 3 offers a walk through the web site of T. A. Barron, who provides valuable literacy and social studies content. Chapter 4 presents an interview with author Judy Blume, in which she explains why and how she uses her web site to make her writings and social concerns come alive for students, teachers, and parents. Chapter 5 focuses on author/illustrator sites where pictures drive the narrative, offering teachers many ways to use spatial entry points to promote literacy. Finally, Chapter 6 demonstrates how all teachers and their students can use Web 2.0 to create their own web sites with their responses to an author study.

Throughout the chapters, activities related to content are included both in the text and in highlighted features. Further activities are provided in companion web sites (http://teaching withauthorwebsites.blogspot.com, http://sites.google.com/site/teachingwithauthorwebsites). At the end of each chapter is an annotated list of additional author sites and web resources to explore. The appendix details how author study that uses online resources can be directly connected to standards in technology, to English language arts, and across the curriculum.