

For Immediate Release

NEWS from Holy Family Catholic Academy

Project Combines Web 2.0 Technology, Collaboration and Social Justice While Linking Schools 25 Miles Away

(Inverness, Illinois) -- Two years ago, you likely had never heard of Facebook or Twitter. Today, dozens of social media or Web 2.0 services like these have exploded in popularity—and not just among young people. In fact, according to Facebook, its fastest growing demographic is people 35 years old and older. And people don't just use social media to make friends or keep in touch with family members. Social media is having a major impact on how people complete projects, serve customers, share data and work in teams.

Despite its growth among people of all ages, no group will be impacted more now and in the future by the rise in social media than today's middle school and elementary school students, which include the end of Generation Y or the Millennial Generation and the dawn of Generation Z or the Internet Generation. Consider this, these young people have grown up with the World Wide Web. Using all variety of social media and wireless devices to communicate comes as natural to them as having a conversation. But how will teachers and schools prepare students to be productive, successful social media citizens in high school, college and beyond?

Holy Family Catholic Academy in Inverness, Illinois has started to address this question. "This spring our middle school students participated in a unique inquiry-based learning project using Web 2.0" explains Holy Family principal Dr. Gretchen Ludwig.

Dr. Emily Alford, the school's curriculum consultant first introduced Holy Family to inquiry learning. Inquiry or project-based learning is a student-centered, active learning approach that focuses on questioning, critical thinking, and problem solving using real world issues. When Dr. Alford's company, inQ²¹ was interested in piloting their new 21st Century Desktop product that incorporates Web 2.0 social networking, they of course went to Holy Family Academy. Dr. Alford and her partners Lori Deichstetter, Lori Hinton, and Cynthia Morgan, also approached another client, St. Frances of Rome School in Cicero to partner with Holy Family.

"Social networking adds a robust dimension to inquiry learning," Dr. Alford explains. "It creates new opportunities for students to explore, collaborate and share what they've learned. In this particular instance, students from two schools in distant parts of the Chicago region explored a socially relevant topic together—adding a unique dimension to the learning experience. With this platform, the same could be accomplished between schools across the country or around the world. This type of experience prepares students in so many ways to be productive, successful 21st century world citizens."

During the project, Holy Family and St. Frances students used leading-edge technologies to gather information, communicate, collaborate, think critically, and solve problems. The students located more than 25 miles away worked in teams to complete the project, through a virtual Web 2.0 platform. This Intranet platform allowed students to share information about their team project and interact with their peers and teachers in a secure environment.

"Our project was on global warming. Both the big problems and little things everyone can do to help solve the problem," said Holy Family student Jonathan Barzacchini. "It was fun working with students from St.

Frances. They brought different ideas to the project. Working with them was a lot like using AIM (instant messaging).”

Goals of the project included:

- Increasing student understanding and use of 21st century communications technologies, including a Web 2.0 social networking platform, blogs, wikis, e-mail, and a Facebook-like component;
- Identifying the critical elements of successful communication, focusing on techniques for communicating persuasively;
- Exploring a real-world issue and developing an understanding of its social and economic implications; and
- Fostering a commitment to making a difference in the world through service learning.

According to Dr. Ludwig, “this project marked the first-in-the-world educational application for use with students,” she explains.

Mr. Clem Martin, Principal of St. Frances of Rome added, “Our school strives to integrate technology throughout our curriculum. The 21st Century Desktop project helped our students use technology to become better information-seekers, analyzers, problem-solvers and communicators.”

Students selected a “cause,” or social issue, for which they have a passion and interest then completed a worksheet entitled “Pick Me” explaining their choice. Along with global warming, some of the causes covered by the students’ projects included homelessness, hunger and animal cruelty. Students then completed a leadership lesson on consensus, and the team was charged with the task of selecting one issue on which to focus. During the project, students logged in from home each night to complete homework.

The students’ final project included a slideshow presentation with voice-over, explaining the project and encouraging teens and “tweens” to advocate on behalf of the cause they selected. These reports will be submitted via the Web site for use by the organization to help promote their work and their cause to local, national, or global communities.

“This is a great opportunity for students to collaborate on real-world problems using the latest technology,” says Mike Barzacchini, Jonathan’s father. “I also like the fact that they’re interacting in a safe, secure Web environment.”

Both Dr. Ludwig and Mr. Martin agree that this assignment clearly incorporates 21st century learning and literacy skills and prepares their students for the multi-cultural, multi-generational work force of the future. “Through this assignment, students learned about collaboration and communicating via the latest technology while exploring a critical issue,” says Dr. Ludwig. “Effectively communicating with distant team members through online forums and media messages are definitely skills our students will need to succeed in the workplace,” adds Mr. Martin. Both principals agree that the overwhelming success of this project at the middle school level ensures that similar projects will be used in the elementary grades at both Holy Family and St. Frances during the 2009-2010 school year.

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