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Educational Technology

Ning

Overview:

Ning is an online tool for creating one’s own private, specialized social network that can include videos, blogs, forums, photos, and personal messaging. Anyone that the network creator allows may create their own online profile. Essentially, it is used to create a private, customizable webpage that works much in the same way Facebook or Myspace does for the general public, and it has been used extensively in different forms by educators for their classrooms and professional development. Its uses are only limited in scope by the nature of the project at hand. Its uses in the K-12 classroom have been vast in variety and are dependent on both imagination and pragmatic concerns. It could be used to create a private network in which students and teachers can share information about the material in a particular class, or, perhaps, to create a network of fictional characters of the students’ making. It can also help to create a community of learners by allowing parents or other teachers to share information about students and teaching. For example, students could be able to show parents their work online, and parents could be able to track their student’s participation by looking at the student forums and discussions. In addition, teachers can create user profiles on Nings designed to contain content related to professional development and begin networking and collaborating with other teachers through built-in forums and chatrooms. Its relative ease of use and built-in templates allow for easy construction of a social network for beginners, and its comprehensive customization options offer a practically infinite number of layout and presentation combinations.

How to Get Started With Ning

1. Research mainstream social networks like Facebook, MySpace, and Edmodo to brainstorm about what you want your Ning to look like and accomplish. Think about what has made these sites successful and which features appeal most to you and your goals for your network.

2. Visit [http://www.ning.com/](http://www.ning.com/?n_e=1&n_v=3) to explore existing Nings for ideas and to get started creating your own Ning immediately.

3. Click on “Create” and start a new membership (Membership options include “Plus” and “Pro” versions for $24.95 and $59.95 per month).

4. Describe the nature of the network you want to create. It can be public or private. You can list keywords to make the Ning findable for nonmembers, write an overview of the Ning, choose a language, a home country, and even create your own snappy tagline.

5. Decide which features would be useful for your network project. Options include music, blogs, pictures, video, and RSS feed.

6. Customize the look of your new social network by changing layouts, colors, and themes. For a simple solution, many templates are included and available. Ning will lead you through the process step-by-step with simple to use information fields when you initially create the network and when you decide to edit it later.

7. Choose a web address for your network that is relevant to your field of discussion and simple to remember.

8. Click on “Launch.”

Links for further help, elucidation, and tutorials:

<http://teachersandcomputers.blogspot.com/2009/06/ning.html>

<http://help.ning.com/cgi-bin/ning.cfg/php/enduser/workshop.php?p_sid=KfvhALFk>

<http://edutechwiki.unige.ch/en/Ning_social_network_platform>

Classroom Examples

While these examples aren’t projects or lessons for use in the classroom, they are excellent samples of pre-existing networks that teachers and students can join to participate in collaborative work, professional development, and idea-sharing.

[English Companion](http://englishcompanion.ning.com/)

This Ning allows English teachers from all over the world to network, share resources, and discuss English curriculum content. It offers resources on teaching texts, curricula, technology, reading, and organizing instruction for students of varying abilities. English Companion also offers a live chat feed to directly discuss educational issues with other instructors as well as a multitude of book clubs and other communal venues. A multimedia section includes embedded links to videos and photos related to in-class materials and teaching practices. There are also outlets for teacher creativity within the site’s “Poetry Roundtable.”

[Classroom 2.0](http://www.classroom20.com)

Classroom 2.0 is a Ning designed to collect ideas and suggestions for using Web 2.0 tools in the classroom. Through a series of blogs, webinars, and discussion forums created by members, teachers in multiple disciplines and geographic locations are able to share new and creative ways to use tools like Skype, SharePoint, and eBackpack in the classroom. With live chat and online teaching workshops, teachers have a variety of ways to manage their own professional development or improve that of their colleagues. The forum is particularly active, and it displays user-created discussions on everything from mathematics instruction to Facebook’s role in modern education. Numerous groups that have been created for this Ning allow users to find areas of shared interest, such as Gifted and Talented education and journalism. In addition, members can find their specific school community or add it as its own group in order to collaborate and share technological strategies.

[107 Voices](http://107voices.ning.com/)

This Ning connects 107 10th-grade English students in a high school in Laurel, Maryland. Students are allowed to create blogs to expand on classroom discussions, and many basic assignments are uploaded on the teacher-created discussion board. Colorful pictures and links to complementary information about the texts that the class is discussing are provided as necessary. The Ning’s creator, “Mrs. W,” also uses the social network to create voluntary discussions about non-related topics such as the students’ potential career choices. For instance, one assignment asked the students to post a carefully crafted response to Ray Bradbury’s use of language to create a sense of foreboding in *Fahrenheit 451* using specific examples from the book. In another assignment, the teacher embedded a video about history textbooks and their usefulness in research versus the internet’s usefulness in research and asked the students to respond in a comments section (just like they would on a news website or on Facebook).

[Rams Read](http://micdsram.ning.com/)

Rams Read is a Ning that encourages thoughtful outside reading for the creator’s English class. The Ning provides a virtual bookshelf of appropriate books that her students may be interested in, and includes links to submit reader responses as well as replies to those responses. In essence, Rams Read reinforces motivation and reflection in regard to reading and provides a student-centered forum in which self-driven learning can occur. While it is primarily used to host student discussions and blogs in regard to their choice of reading material from the virtual bookshelf, it also includes a library of videos and other media related to reading and libraries to pique student interest. In addition, English teachers include other assignments in the form of blog entries. These tend to be small response prompts of no more than four sentences, and they offer students a chance to summarize and analyze aspects of texts for out-of-school reading.

Assessing Ning for the Classroom

*Pros:*

 Teacher Networking – Ning provides an easy way to share resources and knowledge either with members of existing Nings or through the creation of a new social network that meets your specific needs.

 Allows Learning Outside of the Classroom – By using an internet-based medium with unlimited possibilities, teachers can create blogs, video links, and discussion boards that supplement student learning outside of the classroom and allow for clarification of in-class assignments.

 Promotes Collaborative Learning for Teachers and Students – By creating or participating in student and teacher blogs and discussion groups, teachers can easily join and create group assignments that involve responding to others’ prompts and reactions to material.

 Easy to Use – Ning walks you through just a few very simple steps for creating a personalized social network. It also provides a wealth of online tutorials and user links and suggestions to improve the look and functionality of your Ning with relative ease.

*Cons:*

 Price – If an instructor would like to take advantage of the full customization and application options that Ning provides, it’ll cost them. Ning provides a basic package suitable for classrooms for only $19.95 a year, but it has limited functionality compared to the “Plus” and “Pro” packages which cost a substantially larger amount per year (Around $240 and $600 per year, respectively).

 Students Must Learn How to Use Ning – While Ning is relatively easy to use, particularly for the Facebook-savvy, not all students will immediately understand how to productively utilize it. By incorporating Ning into a classroom, teachers will be forced to invest time in training their students to use it.

 Availability of Technology – Schools and students have electronic resources that are limited by funding and socioeconomic status. Not all students may be able to participate in a Ning equally, and some students may be unable to turn in online-only assignments.

 Difficulty of Oversight – While the Ning creator has a level of control over how content can be uploaded, students will have to be on their honor not to post offensive remarks or material on their blog or discussion forums. This may require more time and effort spent in monitoring content for the Ning’s creator, and it introduces the possibility of potential administrative consequences.

Considerations for Teachers

Firstly, teachers interested in incorporating Ning in their classroom should consider the cost and their school’s technological resources. It is not likely that the administration will allow the school to pay for the service, even at the low end, so the cost of using this resource will likely come from your own pocket. However, it is a very creative way to engage students in literature and creative writing. Nings can be created for collaborative student writing, for a shared classroom experience, and to further immerse students in the fictional world that they are reading about. In addition, it provides an excellent opportunity to grow professionally without the travel or expenses associated with conferences. Starting a Ning is a relatively painless process, once the money has been paid, but teachers should begin organizing their Ning well in advance of its use as a classroom tool. By carefully deciding which available features of Ning to use and how to present the material, a teacher will be able to use their homegrown social network much more effectively for other teachers, parents, and students. In addition, instructors should plan for student training to use the Ning. While the networks that Ning creates may be as intuitive to use as mainstream social networking websites, the academic components may require teachers to provide FAQ’s and examples when introducing their Ning in class. The best advice for using a Ning in the classroom is to start simple in terms of assignments (such as assigning simple comment posts to blog entries) and gradually build to more complex assignments (such as role-play). Again, if an instructor decides to use Ning in the classroom, it will require more time and effort as well as money, but if this weighs favorably against the educational opportunities and benefits, it is a wonderfully broad and dynamic tool that has a great deal going for it.