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## FEATURES

# Educators Move Beyond the Hype Over Skype



Olivia Flick, a 3rd grader at Washington Street Elementary School in Brewer Maine, shares facts about her state via Skype with students in South Dakota.

—Carl D. Walsh\_Digital Directions

**Educators are now using the videoconferencing tool to connect foreign-language students to native speakers, hold virtual field trips and host conversations with scientists and other experts**

By [Ian Quillen](#)

For first-time users, there is perhaps an undeniable novelty to **Skype videoconferencing software** that allows students to meet—virtually—with someone anywhere in the world, in real time, and at no cost.

But even the most fervent proponents of its use in education insist curiosity alone isn't enough to justify dedicating class time to videoconferences. Instead, they say Skype must target specific educational goals.

"You want an opportunity for your kids to communicate with other kids about what they are learning," says Becky Fisher, the director of educational technology and professional development for the 13,000-student Albemarle County school district in central Virginia. But "we can't let the abundance of connectivity keep us from thinking," she says.

While conceding the potential for frivolous use of Skype, its advocates say the tool can be particularly valuable for connecting foreign-language students to native speakers, holding virtual field trips, and visiting with real-world subject experts while saving precious funds and preventing logistical headaches. In many cases, teachers are reporting that aspects of video communication actually make teaching and learning more effective than the comparable in-person experiences.

Ironically, the biggest challenge for many Skype pioneers in education may not be convincing their supervisors of its educational value, but finding efficient ways to connect with like-minded Skype partners. Skype Technologies, the tool's developer, is in the first stages of developing a social-media Web destination for "Skyping" educators, but as of press time, it was available only to 300 selected applicants on a pilot basis.

Skype Technologies, based in Luxembourg, has offered the free video and phone conferencing service since 2003, though at the time, many schools weren't equipped with the technological hardware, like webcams, and high-speed connectivity necessary for video correspondence. But with improving technology infrastructures, modifications to the Skype software, and an increasing push for teachers to find new ways to give their students educational experiences, educators appear to have turned more to Skype later in the decade.

Skype Technologies also offers for-pay services to businesses as a provider of Web-based phone networks. [Google Talk](#) also includes free voice and video features for its users, though Skype appears to be the more common method of video communication among educators.

### **'Endless' Potential**

Skype's proponents insist the wave of teachers integrating videoconferencing into the classroom represents the leading edge of what soon will be considered mainstream educational practice.

"[The potential] is so endless," says Colleen Blaurock, who teaches Spanish at Perry High School in Perry, Ohio, about 30 miles northeast of Cleveland. Blaurock early in 2010 connected her students with a large population of native Spanish-speaking students in nearby Painesville for regular Skype conferences, in which students would converse in both English and Spanish.

"What I've found is that the learning transcends the Skype environment," Blaurock adds. "The kids saw a reason in a traditional classroom to learn. And Skype helped make that happen."

In addition to language studies, proponents of Skype in the classroom point to other Skype-friendly educational environments: geography and other social studies, where virtual field trips can easily be aligned to a course curriculum, and English courses, with the possibility of hosting a book's author through a virtual visit.

Pavel Samsonov, an associate professor of education at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette, says his research found Skype could also prove critical in middle and high schools for helping students keep pace when they are absent because of illness, college visits, school suspensions, or pregnancy.

“When it comes to math and science, if you miss a couple of classes, you can be in very poor shape, and it may become impossible to catch up,” says Samsonov, whose pilot study of three homebound Louisiana high school students was funded in part by Skype. He added that while Skype could help students avoid such setbacks, it is critical that schools in those situations treat videoconferencing as mandatory, not optional.

### **Worldwide Audience**

In addition to combating logistical hurdles, educators say targeted use of Skype can bring pedagogical benefits, whether it makes students conduct research necessary for a video presentation more seriously, encourages instructors to focus on broader concepts instead of individual problems because tracing and fixing student work directly is more difficult, or exposes students and teachers to real-time technology problem-solving.

In Virginia’s Albemarle County district, Fisher encourages her teachers to use Skype and other collaboration tools because she believes there is no equivalent for giving students an audience for their work. She compares it to a team sport, in which the Skype activity is game day, and other days of class spent in preparation are like after-school practices.

“The fact that there’s a game on Friday night ramps up practice on Monday afternoon,” says Fisher. “When you look at what the Web allows us to do, every kid in your classroom can have a worldwide audience. That’s true for writing, and that’s true for some of these oral-presentation types of things,” such as videoconferencing.

Chris Frank, the founder of the San Francisco-based Ignition Tutoring, which provides its services via Skype, says he and his staff of about 25 tutors must teach students on a more conceptual level than simply assisting them with homework problems.

“From in the home, [tutors] usually have the book right there. You just get stuck working through homework problems a lot,” says Frank, whose service caters mostly to middle and high school math and science students. “When doing [tutoring] in Skype, if you are working on logarithms today, then you say, ‘All right, let’s go through logarithms.’ It forces you out of that habit of helping with homework.”

Amy Tharp, a literacy specialist for the 6,000-student Littleton, Colo., school system, says an elementary school Skype project has helped both her and her students become more accepting of technological hazards that are commonplace in the real world.

Students at the district's Highland Elementary School have been in regular contact with world traveler Dean Jacobs during his journeys through Africa for his guidance on research about mountain gorillas. Through it all, Tharp says, she and her students have learned how to manipulate Skype's voice, video, and chat features to make sure they maintained connectivity with Jacobs at remote outposts.

"Once you go through the first couple times, you tend to gain a sense of calmness about it," Tharp says. "The more we dropped those calls and had to reboot and adjust, the more comfortable I got with being OK with problems happening. It's helped me transfer that to other technology skills personally."

### **'Skype in Schools' Wiki**

As Tharp and others become more comfortable with the software, they're looking for more like-minded educators to connect with.

**Skype in Schools** is a wiki that allows educators to post messages about their Skype experiences and seek out partners. And **Chatting Across the USA** aims to connect elementary school teachers who want to participate in the Web Chat Challenge first conceived by Cherrie MacInnes, whose 3rd graders at Washington Street Elementary School in Brewer, Maine, about a year ago held videoconferences with classes in all 50 states using either Skype or Google Chat.

But according to research funded by Skype Technologies, finding other teachers to connect with remains more frustrating for educators interested in using Skype than gaining permission from administrators and school technology personnel to use the software.

As a result, Skype in Education, a social-networking Web resource for educators who want to forge ties with similarly minded colleagues, was unveiled in beta form in December to 300 people chosen from more than 3,000 who applied to be part of the site's pilot phase, says Skype spokeswoman Jacqueline Botterill.

Botterill, who is heavily involved in the Skype in Education effort, says the hope is that the site will be a hub for educators not only to link up with one another, but also to find guests to bring in for virtual visits, and to obtain information on best practices for using videoconferencing and other such features in the classroom.

"We haven't put any big targets around this, just because we have no idea how viral this might become," Botterill says. "There are some really passionate educators out there who've been trying to do what we are doing. ... We're not trying to become an authority on this. We're just trying to help those communities come together."

Until then, teachers should still try to seek out partners on their own, Skype's boosters say. More willing partners are out there, they say, than educators might think.

"I thought it would be a tough sell," Blaurock says of her Spanish-English correspondence project. "It involved doing something you're not used to doing. It involved taking a risk and knowing it might fail. It involved the creation of new materials."

"I was fearing that others might not be willing to take that risk," she adds. "And I was wrong."

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