

Let the Ideas Flow

The latest trends in corporate idea generation are being applied to education collaborations with positive results.

BY NICK SEAVER AND LANA SWARTZ

EDITOR'S NOTE: NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND NEW MEDIA APPLICATIONS ARE CHANGING ALL ASPECTS OF K–12 curricula, affecting how teachers approach their subject matter and the ways they teach it. These new possibilities require additional training so teachers can use them effectively. This article follows a group of educators and other professionals as they come together to explore the use of digital technology and new media literacies in teaching geography and mapping. In the process, they also discover a new style of professional development that allows them to collaborate, create, connect, and circulate their new knowledge.

Maps are a kind of media, a way of describing an impression of the world and communicating that impression to others. The traditional media-literacy concepts that ask us to evaluate media messages and critically question who made them—how, for whom, and why—remain relevant, but like all media, maps are shifting away from a one-way, creator-to-consumer model and moving toward a model in which many people are creating and circulating content as well as consuming it.

The website Yelp, for example, allows users to rate and review restaurants, stores, museums, and other institutions and then create lists that map their suggestions for others (such as the best places to go on a rainy day in a certain city). With Google Maps, users can create their own information overlays, making personally useful maps to share in their communities. In these ways, we are becoming producers of information who make sense of and map the physical data of our lives. We then circulate that information to others, many of whom may be sharing their mappings with us. With this new relationship to technology, a new set of cultural skills emerges. Thus, new media literacies are not just the literacies necessary to interact with new media; they also are the skills that allow us to interact with each other in this new, networked public.

New Media Literacies and Mapping

At Project New Media Literacies (Project NML), we know that young people become part of the networked public by participating in it and that educators have an invaluable opportunity to shape students' attitudes toward this participation. This is why we think it is so important to provide resources for

instructors who want to bring the new media literacies into formal learning environments and why we developed the Teachers' Strategy Guide series. These guides, each focusing on a different subject area, provide ideas to help teachers apply the new media literacies to what they are doing. The first Teachers' Strategy Guide focused on reading in participatory culture. The second installment, tentatively titled "Mapping in a Participatory Culture," will focus on mapping and geography and consist of a set of modular, remixable techniques.

Mapping and the new media literacies are a natural combination, whether we're annotating the world using sites like Yelp and Google Maps or using GPS and other devices as we make our way through it. Some of the new media literacies that are especially addressed in mapping are:

- Simulation—the ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes;
- Visualization—the ability to interpret and create data representations for the purposes of expressing ideas, finding patterns, and identifying trends;
- Distributed Cognition—the ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand mental capacities; and
- Negotiation—the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives and grasping and following alternative norms.

New media literacy skills should guide not just the content of the Teachers' Strategy Guide, but also its development. We recognized that, though our team had expertise in cultural approaches to media literacy, none of us were middle-school social studies teachers and none of us were developing

innovative mapping technology. Because collective intelligence—defined as the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal—is one of the 12 skills at the heart of Project NML (see page 9), it seemed clear that the best way to generate great ideas for integrated mapping, new media, and education would be to bring together people with a variety of expertise in these fields to brainstorm techniques that could be further developed into what will become our second Teachers' Strategy Guide.

Harnessing Collective Intelligence

To begin our work, we assembled a group of Project NML staff, secondary school teachers, curriculum and media developers, artists, activists, architects, and designers who work with geography and mapping. We wanted to bring these experts together in some kind of daylong event, but the standard conference model didn't reflect the participatory values of the project. We needed a way to enable the wide variety of participants to have meaningful conversations among themselves. In typical conferences, where attendees listen and speakers speak, sometimes the most exciting insights come out of conversations people have outside the conference structure, getting coffee, chatting online during a boring talk, or standing in the hallway during a break. We wanted to harness this creative dialogue and capture these ideas, making them available to more creative minds.

When developing new products, companies often hold ideation sessions that bring together brand managers, consumer researchers, trend watchers, nutritionists, designers, and anyone else who might have a stake in or an opinion about what form that new product might take. Participants are exposed to a variety of stimuli and brainstorm as many ideas as possible, hoping one will gel into the next big thing. Similarly, self-proclaimed geeks interested in developing a technological solution to a particular problem have, with increasing popularity, been coming together in what has come to be known as an unconference format. Unlike traditional academic conferences, unconference participants set the agenda, there are no designated time frames, and participants follow the "law of two feet," staying with a particular discussion only as long as they are learning or contributing something.

Ideation sessions and unconferences come in many different forms, and we worked to create a hybrid between the two—a space where relevant and concrete ideas could emerge naturally from the interaction of a diverse group. We were concerned about respecting the time and knowledge of teachers, making sure that they could say what would work inside the classroom. These principles guided us in creating an open structure for what we called our Think Tank Day, foregrounding the creative ideation process, but keeping in mind the realities of the classroom and the need for concrete strategies.

Think Tank Day

To unobtrusively capture resources and ideas from the participants, we established a group blog on Tumblr. This platform would provide us with a simple interface for collecting photos, videos, links, and notes before, during, and after the

A New Type of Professional Development

An exciting insight that came out of our Think Tank Day is the recognition that the process we used could become a new model for professional development. How might an unconference provide a more participatory form of professional development for teachers? What would work, and what wouldn't? What kind of environment might work? What other kinds of experts could be brought together? Could an English department bring in journalists, poets, or others around a particular topic? Or could teachers use the model as way of sharing curricular strategies across disciplines?

Novice and veteran teachers have slightly different needs despite their nearly identical job descriptions. How might a participatory structure allow teachers with a variety of experience levels to share knowledge? As teachers become more comfortable with ideation and unconference strategies, how could they find ways to implement the cultural logic of participatory culture in their classroom? For example, perhaps a similar process could be used with older students (who are well prepared beforehand) to interact meaningfully with adults toward a common goal.

Because the Think Tank Day created a small community of teachers connected through Tumblr, we now can push beyond our mapping theme to explore these kinds of questions in a variety of educational settings.

session. In order to create a sense of community and hit the ground running on the day of the session, we asked each participant to post a short biography on the blog in advance, describing his or her work and interest in mapping; we also encouraged them to share interesting websites. This collection of biographies and resources established the varied interests of the participants and informed many of the discussions that would emerge over the course of the day.

By the beginning of the Think Tank Day, nearly all of the participants had introduced themselves to each other and shared links to resources they had created or found interesting. Themes were already emerging from these materials: How could annotating a map in Google Maps be made into a lesson? How can we expand the focus of geography from flags and food to global social and cultural practices? What about classrooms without access to computers? Can we teach new media literacies without using new-media tools?

The participants set the agenda, suggesting possible discussion topics and forming smaller ad hoc groups to brainstorm different strategies. Some groups wanted to think of mapping in the abstract: What does it mean to map something? What would a non-geographic map look like? Why are so many current mapping technologies focused on the idea of layers of information? Other groups worked more concretely, such as compiling a collection of online resources a teacher could use to prepare a lesson.

Given the freedom to set the agenda, the participants could talk about issues they were interested in, comparing perspec-

tives and thinking about their own mapping practices in a reflective and creative space. After each session, the breakout groups could reconvene and discuss the ideas they had come up with, receiving input from a wider variety of voices. This cyclical process—grouping off, reconvening, and constantly discussing—produced a tremendous number of raw ideas that reflected the concerns and ideas of a group of teachers, programmers, artists, and media makers.

Documentation and Debris

During the Think Tank Day, participants captured ideas on the blog. Designated note-takers in each group made sure nothing slipped through the cracks, but any participant could post an intriguing quotation, a link to a site or video that came up in discussion, or general thoughts. Ideas from the various groups could cross-pollinate, providing a way for participants to stay engaged and interact on yet another level. These valuable interactions, which frequently occur in the between-spaces at conferences, became the prime focus of the Think Tank Day. At any point where a conversation could occur, we worked to make sure that it did, and that we could capture the ideas that came from it.

We used the word *debris* to refer to the materials we collected on the blog, on pieces of paper, and on cameras. Debris emphasized the unformed nature of what we were looking for: any bit of an idea, website, or quotation could go onto the blog, where it might be developed by another participant or, together with other unformed ideas, suggest broader developing themes. Most importantly, asking for debris lowered the barrier to participation for those not typically comfortable sharing half-baked ideas; with the work of developing ideas postponed, participants could focus on thinking creatively and quickly.

A Pile of Ideas

The emphasis on creative thinking and interaction resulted in pages of material accumulated on the blog. Currently, we are compiling the debris into a form that will be useful to teachers interested in integrating the new media literacies into their curriculum. Having given the experts a chance to just think through their ideas on mapping, we now can work on condensing these ideas into relevant themes and strategies for teachers. The blog materials can be tagged and grouped into ad hoc collections that focus on specific mapping-related themes or strategies.

The participatory structure that was so productive during the Think Tank Day is continuing to inform the creation of the Strategy Guide. By posting our own work to the blog as it gets underway, we can engage the participants in a continued discussion around the themes they originated. Their responses to the collections of resources and themes we identify allow us to refine our guide as we go, ensuring that we address classroom needs while providing an innovative and proactive set of strategies for teachers.

Strategies for Learning in a Participatory Culture

Participatory culture is revitalizing mapping practices and providing new ways to think about our sense of place. But

participatory culture does not need to stay out of the classroom or outside curriculum development. By bringing ideas from people outside the classroom together with ideas from teaching veterans, we can better prepare students for life outside of school, showing them how geography is not only a school subject, but rather is fundamentally about ways to describe and navigate the real world. By incorporating participatory structures into curriculum development, we can make valuable resources that benefit from the richness of viewpoints across disciplines. The objects of mapping and geography are aligned with participatory culture: seeking ways to make visible and create connections between diverse groups, whether they are trans-spatial or trans-disciplinary. ●●●

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