

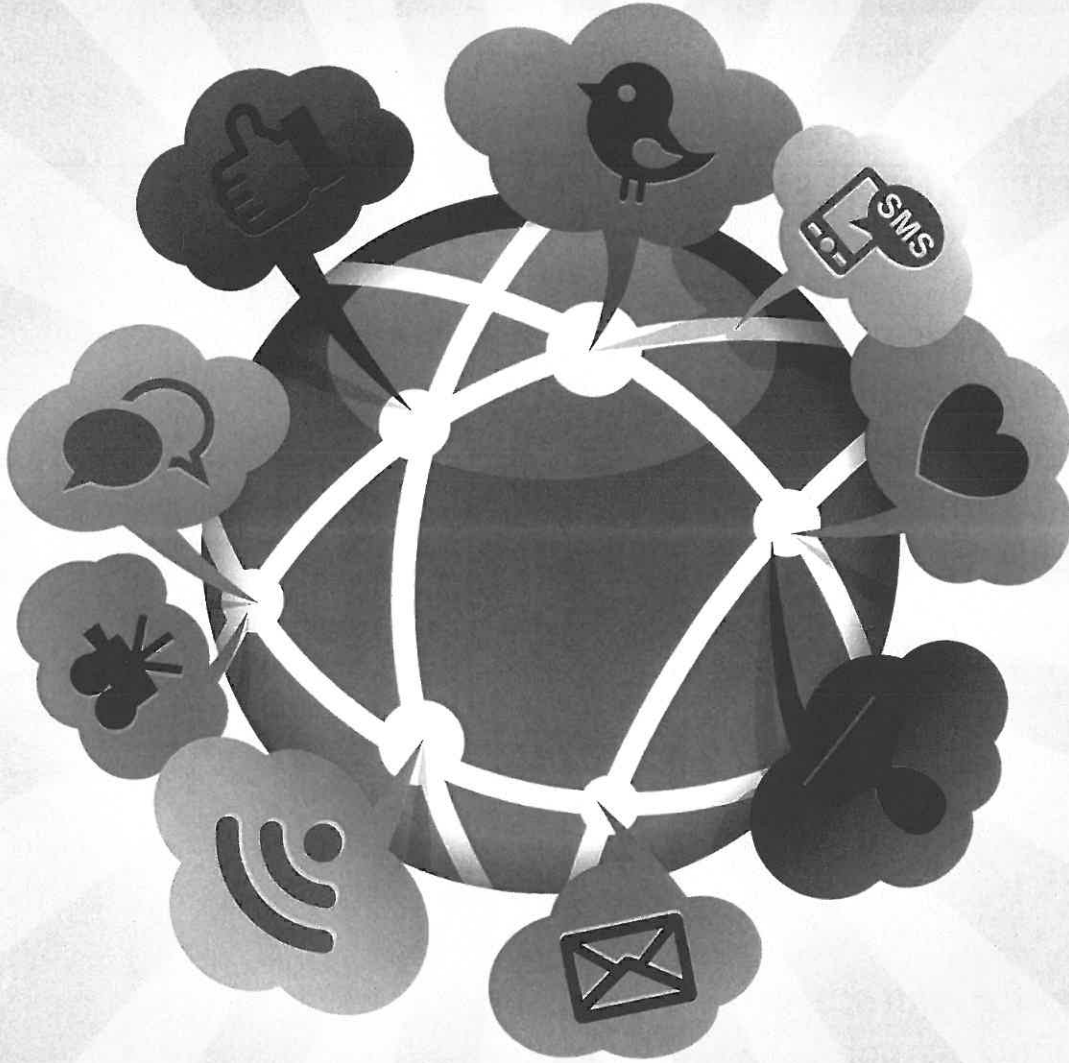


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SOCIAL NETWORKING IN LEARNING

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Promoting Participation and Collaboration with Piazza

By Caitlin Stansell

How many times has a student come to class empty-handed the day an assignment is due with the explanation “I didn’t understand the instructions” or “I forgot that it was due today?” As teachers, we all struggle in this situation and wish there was a simple way to resolve these common issues. No matter how many times we read over the directions, provide daily reminders, and ask if there are any questions, students still run into problems when they are back at home without any way of communicating with their teachers. If students had an easy way of contacting us or another classmate to get any confusion resolved, we would not have to worry about students coming to class unprepared.

To solve this problem, teachers across the United States have begun using Facebook groups and Twitter feeds as a place where students and instructors can discuss upcoming assignments and answer any questions that arise outside of school. However, some have questioned the safety and security of these popular social networking sites. If only there was a website made specifically for student and teacher cooperation that revealed no personal, and potentially problematic, information. Look no further, because *Piazza* has arrived!

piazza

Ask. Answer. Explore. Whenever.

Free online collaboration technology tool and FERPA-compliant www.piazza.com is already making waves and turning heads at the university

level, and it is only a matter of time before middle and high school teachers take notice of its benefits and introduce the site to their students. The designers of Piazza boast that it allows instructors to “save time” and “teach better.” With Piazza, teachers can create spaces online for their students to pose questions, share ideas, and work together to solve problems or complete assignments, thus allowing students to teach each other. As an added plus, teachers can monitor student discussions and add their two-cents as well if they see that their classes are struggling.

And Piazza is not only for getting student questions answered! Teachers can post a class syllabus, reminders about upcoming exams, and feedback from a particular lesson to engage the class

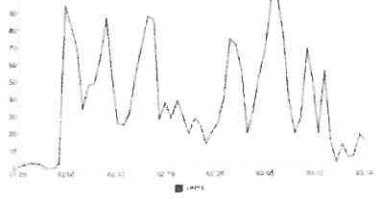
and keep students thinking about the information discussed in the classroom. Students who are absent can use Piazza to ask colleagues and instructors what they missed and download any new assignment worksheets. Teachers can also post homework and due dates on their class pages.

While Facebook class groups and other popular social networking sites have their advantages in and out of the classroom, some districts do not allow their teachers to use these tools for educational purposes. Piazza provides a safe online place where students and teachers have all of the same benefits as any regular social networking site, plus more. Besides hosting a single space where all can collaborate to complete assignments and answer questions, Piazza allows instructors to post class handouts, project instructions, and links to YouTube videos,

Chart your class's progress ✕

Click the statistics icon to track students' participation.

See who's enrolled, who's participating, when activity peaks, and how fast questions are being answered.



journal articles, and other class-related material. Students will then always have this information available on the class page in case their hard copies are ever lost; this ultimately saves both time and paper.

A recent article in *The New York Times* (Rusli, 2011) showcased the collaborative website and discussed how its tools and capabilities give users a similar social networking feel as Facebook. The article also gives insight into the creative and imaginative mind of the originator of Piazza, Pooja (Nath) Sankar. After being released to the Stanford University student community in 2009, the site has now reached over 330 schools after being opened to all institutions in January 2011. Piazza has proved its popularity in a very short time; in less than two years, instructors and students across the country have discovered the benefits of this interactive online tool.

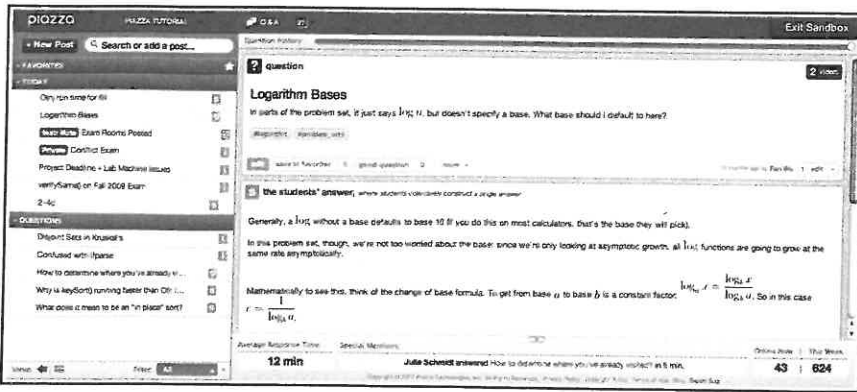
Consider this scenario: You assign a project to be completed with a group at home, but students complain that their different schedules do not allow them to all meet at the same time and place. This is another issue that teachers are fighting in today's society; between afterschool jobs, sporting events, band

Browse your question feed ✕

The question feed shows all the questions in your class.

Look for the icons to quickly see what's been answered or updated:

- S** This question has a student's answer.
- i** This question has an instructor's answer.
- 3** The number of updates since you last viewed this post



information is available; this color-coding also differentiates between student and instructor-posted material. Instructors can choose to let students post anonymously or with their identities shown, and they are able to endorse student responses that they feel are particularly strong. This allows students to feel safe asking any questions and responding to one another.

To get started, all instructors need to do is register a class page under their school's name. Once the class page is established, teachers then invite students by either giving them a signup link or entering their e-mail addresses in the Settings tab; students will then automatically receive a link to activate their account. Do not let another student question go unanswered ever again! Sign up today and allow students to explore, respond, and collaborate in the cyberspace world of Piazza!

References:

Rusli, E. M. (2011, July 3). Homework help site has a social networking twist. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/04/technology/04piazza.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1&ref=homework

Caitlin Stansell recently completed the Master of Arts in Educational Studies with Secondary Teacher Certification program at the University of Michigan and is now substitute teaching high school English in the Lansing area. She can be reached via e-mail at: cstansell@umich.edu.

practices, and caring for younger siblings, students are involved in a number of different extracurricular activities every day, making it almost impossible for their free time to align with that of their peers. That is where Piazza comes in! Students can collaborate on their own time to assign roles, generate ideas, and complete any group assignment. Instructors are also able to monitor everyone's progress and participation to ensure each group member is pulling his or her own weight.

Piazza includes a variety of tools that allows both students and instructors to post responses, help answer questions, and create new questions and material for collaboration. This is more efficient for teachers because they no longer need to repeatedly answer the same question from different students via e-mail. Whenever a new question is asked or a new response is posted, it is highlighted in a different color to show that new

The New and Really Cool 21things4students

By Sue Schwartz



<http://remc.org>

The 21things4students (21things4students.net) Project was developed to equip students with 21st Century Technology Skills, for success in their education, jobs, and lifelong learning experiences. 21things4students was specifically funded by the REMC Association of Michigan to provide districts with resources to help students meet or exceed the 8th grade technology proficiency requirements in Michigan. Over 700 educators from Michigan and across the country use this resource with 10s of 1,000s of their students.

The 21things4students (21t4s) design team of Carolyn McCarthy-Project Manager, Jan Harding and Jennifer Parker-Moore-Macomb ISD and Melissa White-Ingham ISD along with members of the REMC Instructional Technology Specialists and classroom educators took two years of feedback from students and teachers and made many improvements to the website this past summer.

The new 21things4students site, launched this past August, features a more "kid-friendly" look and feel, more videos and interactivity, a more game-like approach (with points, badges

and achievement levels), less text on the pages and more audio options for listening to the introductions and directions. The teacher web links and lessons have been updated and/or revised with the addition of some of the activities contributed by the educators using this site.

21 Things 4 Students
REMC Association of Michigan



Students start off as Recruits to the 21t4s Academy. They begin with a Basic Orientation, graduate to a "Cadet" and then become "21t4s" Agent attending the 21t4s Agency". Upon completing all of the 21 things-missions made up of quests (projects)-the 21t4s Graduate is presented with a printable certificate. Teachers are the SSI Department Chief (Secret School Instructor). They approve student work and award badges and gems for completed things.

We hope students and teacher alike enjoy this Project and learn a lot of new skills.

If you have any questions about the REMC Association or its Projects, please contact me at sueschwartz@remc.org.



Sue Schwartz is the Executive Director for the REMC Association.