

Bridging the Home and School: An Investigation of an Online Gradebook

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Over the past twenty years, technology has dramatically altered the way in which we access information. Yet most schools have not kept pace with these changes when it comes to how parents obtain information on their child's progress. Twenty years ago, ten years ago, even today, schools issue quarterly reports and parents meet with teachers at scheduled times two or three times a year. Other than these scheduled intervals, the majority of contact between the school and the home is when teachers need to call home to discuss discipline issues.

Unlike other aspects of society, where things like electronic mail make people easily accessible and the world wide web allows people to access personal information (e.g., banking) from the comfort of their own homes, schools have yet to take advantage of all that the digital age has to offer. At present there are a number of web-enabled technologies that allow the school to make students' records available to the home in an online, password protected environment; one such web-enabled technology is myGradebook.com.

myGradebook.com is "a web-based teacher gradebook used for enhancing communication between teachers, students and parents. myGradebook.com allows teachers to log in and work on their gradebook at any time from any computer connected to the Internet. After assigning passwords to students and parents, they are able to login to view grade and attendance summaries for that individual account. myGradebook.com allows you can track, calculate, and report grades and attendance securely over the Internet. During the 2000-01 school year, the myGradebook.com system was tested in a mandatory World Geography course, taught by a teacher who was not the author.

Fifteen of the twenty-one students in this class had access to computers at home, while four did not (three of which were female students). The majority of students reported that they used their computer once a day or several times a week for a few minutes to two hours at a time. The majority of this time was spent using a word processor or some aspect of the Internet (e.g., e-mail, surfing the web, or chatlines). The male students tended to report using their computers for additional purposes, such as gaming and music programs.

At the end of the year, nine of the thirteen students who responded reported to have used the myGradebook system: six to check both marks and attendance; two to check just their marks and one to see if they could login to the system. Ten of the thirteen students stated they would like to see myGradebook.com used more in their schooling and nine felt that it was a good way to keep parents/guardians informed of their progress.

The students who supported expanded use of the system made comments such as “it shows parents how well their child is doing in school,” “so parents can be more aware of how well their children are doing with their courses,” and “children might be having trouble with school and may not be showing parents their marks.” Interestingly, one student in favour remarked “it’s a good way to catch people skipping off” and requested that “major homework assignments should be posted when assigned and the due date.”

Of the students not in favour to expanding the system, they commented “report cards can let our parents know” and “report cards are for informing parents of their children’s grades. We don’t need to argue with our parents every time our mark is bad.” It should be noted that of the students who were not in favour to expanding the system, none of them had access to a computer at home.

Interestingly, none of the three parents who responded had accessed the system: two remarked that they did not have access to a computer at home and the third commented that their child kept them well informed on how they were doing. However, two of the three parents felt that the myGradebook.com system was something that teachers should be using more. They felt that “some parents are misinformed by their children of there is no communication at all” and that “it lets the parents know how their child is doing.”

The lone parent who felt that the system should not be used more remarked “not every family has access to a computer and the Internet.” Interestingly, however, in this class 75% of the students reported that they did have access to a computer and the Internet at home. Even one of the parents who wanted the system used more, but did not have access to a computer at home commented “I don’t have a computer, but I think this project is worth having.” This leads to the concern of what percentage of families have access to optional initiatives before they are implemented, something that those considering this type of system need to be aware of.

From a personal perspective, I found that the system was personally easy to use and that it allowed me a quick way to eyeball attendance records and the students overall average on a moment’s notice. It also allowed me to produce records that were needed by the teacher to include on the schools electronic student report cards. This means that if I had been teaching this course, I would have been able to produce these records with the same ease.

For the students who were accessing the system, many would come to see me (even though I wasn’t teaching this class or teaching any of these students in any other course) to find out when I was going to update the system so that they could see what their class average was without having to calculate it themselves. For the students, it became as important to them as my own Gradebook had been to me when I was a classroom teacher.

Overall, the results seemed positive towards the initial trial and interest in expanding the use of the myGradebook.com system. Much of the lack of interest and usage by both students and parents can probably be attributed to the fact that only one of the students' seven to nine courses were contained in the system. However, given that this trial occurred with one class in a rural school, located in an economically depressed region, further trials should be undertaken prior to any widespread acceptance.