

Building Community with My eCoach

by Cheryl Vitali



Author Cheryl Vitali has come full circle in technology and special education, as both Resource Specialist and Tech Mentor. The last few years have found her deprived of technology. teaching Reading Recovery—a method she found highly successful in keeping students out of special education. This year she is back in the classroom with the prospect of exciting technology projects. This one, My eCoach, promises to involve many other teachers as well!

Finding time to collaborate with colleagues is always a challenge in schools, especially in the United States. So having a resource that facilitates this process and makes it easy is really valuable to educators. The online community *My eCoach* (<http://my-ecoach.com/>), founded by Barbara Bray, fills this need and does so in a way that is easy, time efficient, and makes it simple to plan curriculum, connect with educators worldwide, and align to standards.

In past articles, I have shared various online communities like listservs and other online networks. I have explored more complex online environments for educators that are fun yet probably will remain unused by most teachers as they are not very user-friendly. I have used *My eCoach* to create a travel blog and found it quicker and easier than prior methods I used. Now they have added a feature called the *Universal Builder*, and the ability to create a slick, professional individual Web site is now even easier. All the time I took to learn html and coding has been useful in many ways, yet I have a lot more to do than spend so much effort creating Web pages for classroom use. This online community makes it easy and is affordable enough for any school to offer lifetime memberships to a staff.

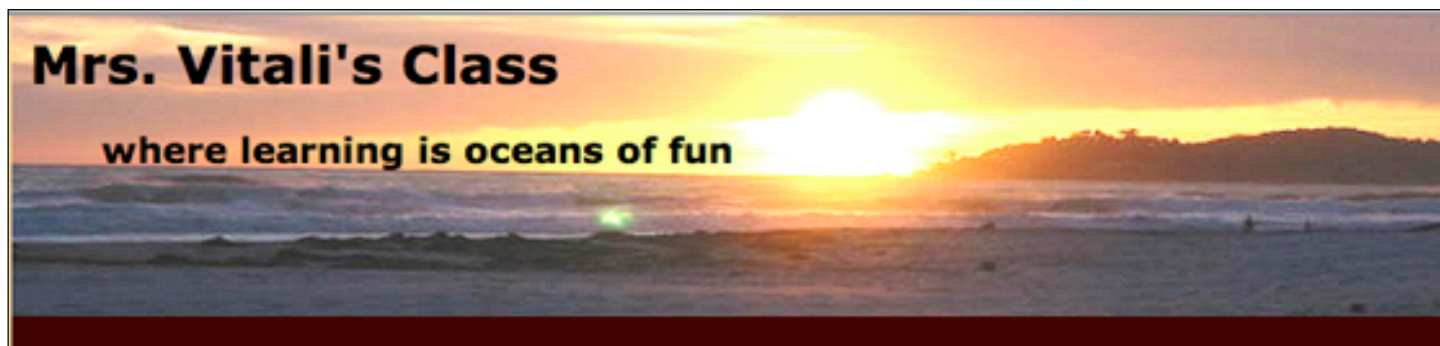
So why am I promoting this? Frankly, it fills a void and need I have seen for years and offers the type of online and professional community I have dreamed of for schools in a way that is realistic and viable. There is one aspect of *My eCoach* that is profound, though how teachers use it is entirely up to them. They can collaborate and build with a team or design and use materials they have complete control over. Nor do they have to reinvent the wheel; the pro-

gramming makes it simple to share, duplicate, and change resources to fit specific needs. Educators have the option to set up their own Web domain to link to school sites. This is very empowering for teachers at a time when they often feel completely overwhelmed by all that is demanded of them.

Teachers can also control the variables of access and use by parents and students so that the site can be dynamically used by classroom communities. What if someone finds an incredible resource to share, or a video clip to use? It is as simple as a couple of clicks to embed codes and links on a class Web page to make a safe link for students to use in the classroom, minus all the ads and distractions on many Web pages. Even if educators have no desire to build their own Web domain, they will find ideas, lessons, and resources that are useful for them in the classroom. It is feasible to build an online site that helps address diverse student needs and make it flexible to changes on even a daily basis if desired.

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Over the course of this next year, I will be able to have lots of practical applications using *My eCoach* and evaluating the effectiveness of integrating it with instruction based on my students' growth and achievement. Back in January, I was dismayed at the budget cuts that eliminated a phenomenal program for our district. (*"Loss and endurance: surviving budget cuts in special services," TheCatalyst, Vol 23#4, p. 9. The author discusses the impact of loss of Reading Recovery, a successful program for keeping at-risk students out of special education.*) However, change brings new opportunities, and the move back into the classroom has opened some advantages over my prior position. Now I am in a situation to tap back into my skills and Masters' Degree in



Using *My eCoach*, the author has created a template for a class web site which will be filled in during the year.
See: <http://my-ecoach.com/project.php?id=13245>

Educational Technology. My years of specialization and addressing at-risk or special education students add that additional perspective.

Reading Recovery works on learning to collaborate closely with other teachers professionally, as well as observing students closely and actively applying these insights into the teaching process in an active way. It was very exciting to see how many teachers in my district were enthusiastic that someone was tackling the idea of building a first grade Web site based on our district, let alone other grade levels. They dreamed of something like this for their use and wanted to know about it. Yet in a matter of minutes, I was able to help two of my team members have their own Web domain created with ease, so we can start building together.

Teachers have far too much to do and never enough time to do all of it. Finding time to share, support, and encourage each other is often difficult. It can also be difficult to keep close enough home/school connections that are so important to building the lifetime skills and foundations for full literacy and success. Yet much of this task becomes easier when using the tools provided by a visionary online community like *My eCoach*.

These were a few of the questions posted on introductory links to the site.

How do you:

- create learning communities for different purposes?
- develop collaborative projects?
- plan and support each other?
- learn leadership skills?
- design your own site?
- set up your own team?

For teachers who have been hesitant to dabble with online collaborations and designing Web sites, *My eCoach* takes much of the hassle and worry out of the process. Those who think they do not have enough time to do this will probably be surprised how easy and quick it can be. I am looking forward to introducing the staff at my new school, Silas Bartsch, to this online community and seeing how it takes off over the next year. Our staff is facing the daunting challenge of being housed at various schools while construction is being completed. We may not be on the same school site until sometime in October, yet we can already be building a real school community through our online community.

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A classroom project using My eCoach

Dr. Seuss Birthday Bash!

One Birthday More: It's 104!

Roxanne Clement, a Media Center teacher in Alameda, CA, created a fun project about Dr. Seuss which shows how students can participate and how their activities can be recorded online. The project is an annual, all-day, school-wide celebration in the Media Center of Dr. Seuss's birthday (104 this year). It uses audio and video podcasts, photos, movie clips, Voice Threads, and more to record activities throughout the day. Links are given to podcasts and photos, a VoiceThread discussion of the event, facts about Dr. Seuss, a blog about his books, and interactive games, so students can continue to enjoy the day's festivities. Using *My eCoach*, the project also can be continually updated.



Students get into character for Dr. Seuss's Birthday Bash.

The Reader's Oath

I promise to read
Each day and each night
I know it's the key
To growing up right
I'll read to myself
I'll read to a crowd
It makes no difference
If silent or loud.
I'll read at my desk
At home and at school

On my bean bag or bed
By the fire or pool.
Each book that I read
Puts smarts in my head
Cause brains grow more thoughts
The more they are fed.
So I take this oath
To make reading my way
Of feeding my brain
What it needs every day.

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