Expert Advice: Ted Nellen, Cyber-Renegade
Interviewed by Amy Poftak
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- Taught for 17 years at Murry Bergtraum High School in New York City.
- In 1984, created Cyber English, an alternative approach to teaching literature and writing that incorporates e-mail, Web publishing, and online mentoring into the daily curriculum (www.tnellen.com/cybereng/).
- Currently works as a Cybrarian for TaskStream, a Web-based service for educators. Also moonlights as an instructor for New School Online University, Classroom Connect University, and Fordham.
- First job when he arrived in New York: one-man editor of Hosiery & Underwear magazine.
- What he's reading: Feast of Love by Charles Baxter; Jefferson's Children: Education and the Promise of American Culture by Leon Botstein.

Sixteen years ago, Ted Nellen launched an experimental high school class called Cyber English—and he's been working the Web ever since. Here, he talks about what it's like to go virtual and why he's left the traditional classroom behind.

When did you start using technology in your classroom and how did it evolve?
In 1984, my school got some computers that no one wanted, so they made the new guy work with them. I started playing around with them in English class. We had the National Writing Project in our school, and especially for the peer review process, I realized that I could move the kids around and move text around with the computer more easily than paper. We got networked and peer review increased. In the early days, Novell had this function that allowed me to sit at my machine and watch a kid work and broadcast it to everyone very quickly. Then the Web came along and the kids could publish to the whole world.

You spent many years teaching a Web-centered class; now you're an online instructor. You seem to be in a good position to comment on the future of distance learning.

It's all on the Web. Education right now is static. A teacher comes in and works with too many students in too short of a time frame with too many things to do, and nothing gets done. By putting the kids in front of computers, they can be in a synchronous and asynchronous conversation with kids in the classroom or with people outside. When I had my cyber-kids, they were doing e-mail and writing, moving back and forth between the screens and talking at the same time. These kids know how to multitask. It's we adults who don't know how to do it.

I was at a hearing in Washington where one of the speakers—Terry Cannings, a professor from Pepperdine—said that the quality of online discussion is better than face-to-face discussion. Do you agree with that?

Absolutely. Because what you're dealing with is intellect. Human beings have senses and unfortunately we have prejudices, and they have a bearing on how we behave in the classroom. Kids' actions may just aggravate us because they remind us of something we hate in our lives and there's not a thing we can do about it. We have a real problem with our physical presence, whether it's attraction or repulsion. We also have a fear of grouping adults next to kids. When you're online, you're eliminating that aspect. Now I could put a 47-year-old there with a 7-year-old and no one's going to get crazy about it. It's just a pure energy you're working with and the distractions aren't there.

Wouldn't some say that our inability to deal with our prejudices is a reason why we should confront these things head on in person?

I agree with you, but looking at how people reacted to my kids online and how these kids were treated in the streets of New York City made me see the Web as crucial. Look at what's happening in the Middle East. I'm on lists with Jews and Arabs and they are civil and have intelligent dialogues. History tells us, especially in the Middle East and Northern Ireland, that face-to-face summits are temporary whereas Web-based discourse may help us make solid intellectual connections and transcend our face-to-face prejudices.

But can people get the same type of social engagement online as they do in person?

Remember that face to face you're dealing with one person at a time. In an online world like a MOO, you're interacting with a lot of different people at the same time. In a listserv, you could be having four or five different conversations. You're able to balance asynchronous and synchronous, and you really can't do that in a traditional classroom.

Given that, what would be your vision of the perfect school?

Schools would be places where people could gather and move around. Just as you sit in an office and do all your work on a phone and computer, and maybe go to a conference room for group meetings—schools should be more like that. Kids wouldn't have to come in all the time. They could do stuff from home sometimes, move around to other offices. The teachers could move around in packs and bring in people who have knowledge on a particular theme. Students could share information on the Web, work in Word, and answer e-mail—all at the same time.

You've talked about how technology can enhance learning. When is technology not an asset?

When it is filtered. Filters don't allow us to teach children how to use the Internet correctly. Schools are the one place that has people who can help kids through the use of the Internet. Kids go home and go online unsupervised for many more hours than they do at school. Most stories of pedophilia or tragedy that involve the Internet are when kids are at home in chat rooms. There is no evidence to warrant what legislation and people are doing to the Internet in schools. Prohibition is always a waste of time and history proves

that. In fact, history has proven that we've done so many things badly—how we treat people, how we treat new things, how we run our schools.

Is that why you left teaching?

I left teaching because it got to be more like 1900 than 2000. There were a number of nails in the coffin, but the final one was when New York decided there was only one way of assessing students, and it was the high-stakes Regents test. I was doing everything in Webfolios and presenting a case that this was a great way to assess kids—this was my doctorate work—and we weren't allowed any kind of authentic assessment. It just killed me. So I resigned and joined an educational consulting company.

Amy Poftak is senior editor for T & L.