

Playing with Skype

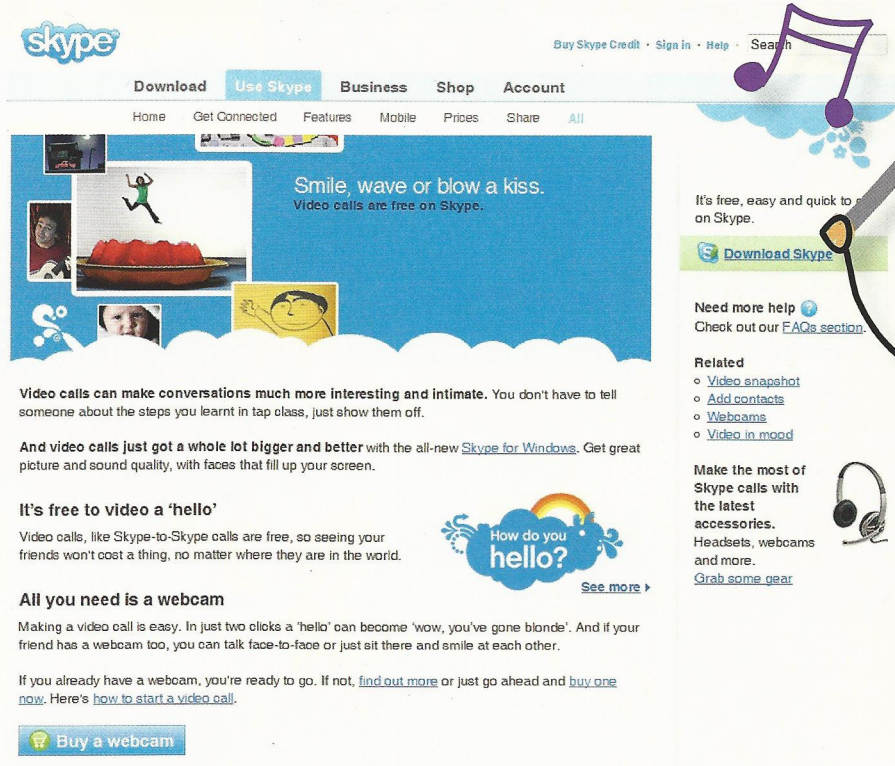
I have attended many performances where the composer, as the guest conductor for an honors band, has shared personal insights. It's a great opportunity for students to directly connect with the artist whose music the students are performing. But short of flying them in for just one song, it's difficult to bridge the gap between the composers of school band music and the students and audience they are seeking to engage. I thought there had to be a way to help those who write great music connect with the students who bring it to life and the families who are listening.

With the help of my friend and colleague, Joseph M. Pisano of Grove City College in Pennsylvania, I came up with a way to bring composers to live concerts using technology. Pisano and I invited our mutual friend and colleague, Jason Davis, into my eighth grade general music classroom using Skype. Davis, then a freelance musician and licensing agent, spent 45 minutes discussing copyright laws, the music business, and censorship. Over lunch that day, the idea to use Skype at a live concert came to us.

Making It Happen

The equipment requirements were very minimal: a computer with a broadband Internet connection, a data projector, a couple of microphones, a webcam, some adapters to pump the audio feed through the sound system, and a projector screen. A lot of this hardware was available at our school through a grant from Classrooms for the Future. The technology coordinator and staff made sure we had a good connection, and several of Pisano's students from

Skype makes it possible for educators to seek



Grove City College assisted with behind-the-scenes work.

We brought three noted composers into the concert setting: Scott Watson of Allentown, Pennsylvania, who has composed for concert, radio, and theater and wrote the book *Using Technology to Unlock Musical Creativity*; Brian Balmages, a guest conductor for honors bands, university groups, and professional ensembles; and Andrew Boysen Jr., assistant professor in the music department at the University of New Hampshire, where he conducts the wind symphony and teaches conducting, composition, and orchestration.

They agreed to appear live at the concert via Skype and make the introduction for their pieces before the student ensembles performed them. The introduction turned into an interactive

conversation that was very meaningful to the students and the audience.

Enriching and Easy Too

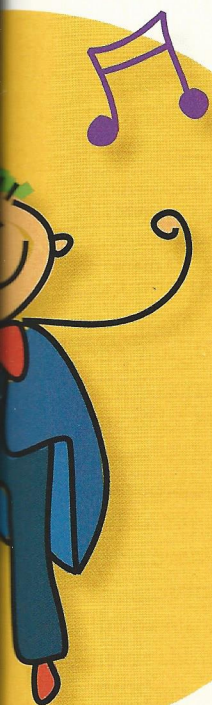
I have one steadfast rule about using technology in my classroom and rehearsal hall: If it makes for a richer educational experience, then it is worth it. This experiment was certainly enriching and well worth the brief amount of time it took for everyone to figure it out.

Skype's ease of use as a telecommunication platform is unrivaled. We used the free version for each of the three calls. We went to www.skype.com, signed up in a few simple steps, and after a brief installation, Skype was ready to use.

Two of the composers, who had never tried the program before, used

By Travis J. Weller

out experts in their subject area and invite them to share in the classroom or the rehearsal hall.



Skype with no problem.

They were impressed with how simple it was to make this connection.

It afforded them the opportunity to be very direct with their explanations about their pieces so that both the audience and ensemble could better identify with them.

Connecting with Experts

Skype makes it possible for educators to seek out experts in their subject areas and invite them to share in the classroom or the rehearsal hall.

Later, I invited Patrick J. Burns, a composer from Montclair State University, to join another one of my ensembles for a question-and-answer session during a regular school day. The questions and comments from the students were very thoughtful and engaging.

It made me wonder how many other experts in other fields could be brought in to speak with students so that they might consider a different career or get a better understanding of the paths that lie ahead.

We are seeing a paradigm shift in education, where the teacher is no longer the absolute authority of knowledge in the classroom. I would like to think that Skype can make every classroom bigger and more open to all experts in every field. Educators shouldn't fear this aspect of technology, but instead tap into its potential. What 10 years ago would have taken a satellite and a television truck can now be accomplished using two laptops and a couple of webcams.

—Travis J. Weller has been the director of bands at Mercer Area Middle-Senior High School in Pennsylvania since 1995. He graduated from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh with a master's degree in music education.

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