



To: Celebrate Oklahoma Voices Project Participants
From: Wesley Fryer
Date: November 11, 2008
RE: Learning Community Website Issues

We have received several questions regarding our “Celebrate Oklahoma Voices” (COV) learning community website (<http://lc.celebrateoklahoma.us>) recently. The purpose of this memo is to address several of these questions, clarify some issues, and provide insight into the ongoing development and direction of our project. Celebrate Oklahoma Voices is presented by The Oklahoma Heritage Association. (www.oklahomaheritage.com) COV is a statewide digital storytelling project empowering learners to become digital witnesses, archiving local oral history and sharing that history safely on the global stage of the Internet.

HOW IS THE COV WEBSITE MODERATED?

COV workshops are led by teams of Oklahoma educators who serve as facilitators. Facilitators are set up on the COV learning community website as administrators with authority to moderate members and content on the site. New members who join the learning community must be approved by a facilitator/administrator, and new videos or photos added to the site must also be approved. To date, I have been handling the moderation of new members and newly added videos to the site, as well as following all activity on the site including comments which are posted by members to videos or to others in the community. Anonymous commenting is not permitted on the site. As we further develop our co-facilitator program for COV in 2009, we will offer guidelines and training for our facilitators in moderating website members and content. Past participants in COV are welcome to become project facilitators. More information about that process will be posted to our website in December 2009.

WHY IS THE WEBSITE SETUP THROUGH NING.COM?

Our website is accessible from the address <http://lc.celebrateoklahoma.us>. If your school district’s content filter is set to “whitelist” the domain “celebrateoklahoma.us” then you should be able to view content (including videos) on our learning community website. You should NOT have to unblock or whitelist the entire ning.com domain and subdomains. Please contact me directly if you need assistance

working with your IT department or the company providing your content filtering service for your school.

One of the important purposes advanced by the COV project is providing a safe, moderated online community environment for both Oklahoma teachers and students to post, share, and discuss videos as well as other issues relating to our digital storytelling project. For students as well as educators to learn digital citizenship skills in the 21st century, it is vital that safe environments be provided where learners of different ages can practice safe and ethical online behavior. Our Ning.com website has allowed COV project facilitators to create a dynamic and safe web environment which serves primarily as a location to post, share, and respond to project videos. Our project grant pays to have advertising removed from our Ning website, the Ning promotional links removed, and to use a custom domain for our site. While our site is accessible from <http://celebrateoklahoma.ning.com>, it is also accessible from <http://lc.celebrateoklahoma.us> and we recommend schools whitelist “celebrateoklahoma.us” to provide access to the site for all students and teachers.

During late fall of 2008 and spring of 2009, we are spending approximately \$20,000 of our COV grant from AT&T to purchase dedicated server hardware and pay for the development of a custom learning community website using the open-source content management system Drupal (drupal.org). Via an extensive RFP process our COV server advisory sub-committee selected the Oregon-based company Funnymonkey (www.funnymonkey.com) to develop this website which will have the functionality of our current Ning site with additional user and site controls for teacher participants as well as project administrators. OneNet (www.onenet.net) is providing unlimited bandwidth/hosting for the COV project server on its network, and we are very enthused about the potential for our project to grow in the months and years ahead.

Our Ning website has served us well, and we plan to continue using our current site through the Spring of 2009. Prior to the start of our summer 2009 workshop series, we plan to transition over to our new Drupal learning community. That website will not use Ning.com at all, so content filtering issues related to Ning should not be a factor at that point. The main project website will continue to be <http://celebrateoklahoma.us>. We will migrate videos and content from our Ning website into our new Drupal website.

DOES THE USE OF A SOCIAL NETWORKING WEBSITE LIKE THE COV NING SITE ENDANGER STUDENTS?

Absolutely not. Most teenage students today are already utilizing social networking websites on their own, but the vast majority of those sites are entirely unmoderated by caring adults in their community. The COV learning community site is moderated by Oklahoma educators, and provides a safe, accountable website for learners of all ages to engage in video sharing and discussions about project videos.

All of the schools in our state receiving E-Rate funding provide some level of content filtering for students and teachers on their computing networks as required by law. Unfortunately, some leaders are mistakenly operating under the assumption that blocking access to websites which permit users to engage in social networking is a complete strategy for helping students become responsible and ethical decisionmakers as 21st century digital citizens. Limited content filtering on school networks IS important, but students and teachers MUST be provided with opportunities to practice safe and ethical social networking AT SCHOOL if we are to fulfill our obligations to provide students with a relevant education which prepares them for today as well as the challenges of tomorrow.

No one can learn to swim by watching a teacher explain the process using a chalkboard. We have to get into the water and actually swim to learn how to do it, and overcome our fear of the water. Similarly, no one can learn safe and responsible social networking skills without actually practicing those skills in an online environment. Our moderated environment provides that opportunity for students in Oklahoma.

HOW DO COV PROJECT FACILITATORS AND SITE ADMINISTRATORS HANDLE THE POSTING OF INAPPROPRIATE COMMENTS OR MATERIAL TO THE WEBSITE?

I, along with other COV project facilitators and administrators, work directly with teachers in our Oklahoma schools to address any questions or concerns which come up regarding the propriety of online discussions and shared content on our COV learning community website.

To date, after having over 100 videos posted to our site and over 200 people join our learning community, we have had only two incidents of inappropriate content on our site. Both instances were resolved by working directly with local teachers in schools, who were former COV project participants. We have established a policy in which COV students are required to use an “avatar” rather than a photograph on their learning community profile page. By moderating new user accounts as well as submitted videos and photos, we have been able to facilitate safe dialog in our accountable digital learning environment.

In the Drupal version/revision of our learning community website being developed for Spring 2009, teachers will be afforded more direct control over the moderation of student comments as well as accounts for students from their school/classroom. This level of control will be in addition to the moderation abilities already afforded to project facilitators and site administrators. What will not change in the future revision of our site is the accountability which is present in our community TODAY. Individuals are not permitted to participate, comment, or contribute anonymously, and contributions by those approved to be included in our learning community are moderated by project facilitators / administrators.

CAN STUDENTS UNDER AGE 13 JOIN THE CURRENT COV WEBSITE?

No. Because of COPPA restrictions, students under the age of 13 are not permitted to join any Ning website (including ours) and establish a user account. We are working with Funnymonkey to ensure our revised website will also be COPPA compliant.

CONCLUSIONS

I hope these answers provide more background about our COV project and learning community website, as well as insights into where we are headed in 2009 together. As the director of technology and education outreach for the Oklahoma Heritage Association, I am pleased to continue partnering with a diverse group of Oklahoma educators and organizations to refine and develop the COV project. Our project started in the fall of 2006, and has been ongoing now for two years.

We are continuing to open up doors of opportunity for valuable digital learning on the part of teachers as well as students in our state through our collaborative work together. While many older adults less familiar with new digital technologies are fearful of the Internet and may perceive technology to be an isolating and alienating influence, the powerful stories and personal networking opportunities provided by our COV project offer critically needed contexts for cognitive dissonance on the part of those adults. Digital technologies can and are being used in many positive, powerful, and constructive ways, and the work of Oklahoma teachers and students in our COV project provides many cases in point.

We need your help in further amplifying and sharing these wonderful stories and constructive examples of digital video use and social networking in our Oklahoma schools and communities. If you have not already, I encourage you to share the web address for videos on our learning community site with others in your community. That address is:

<http://lc.celebrateoklahoma.us/videos>

Please also share the website of The Oklahoma Heritage Association and Gaylord-Pickens Museum, which is proud to present the COV project in collaboration with a growing number of organizations throughout our state. More information about our project partners as well as current COV initiatives is available on our website under the EDUCATION link for EDUCATOR WORKSHOPS:

www.oklahomaheritage.com

Please offer to share videos created by student and teacher COV participants at meetings of local service clubs, church groups, and other community organizations in your local area. Share the stories of “Celebrate Oklahoma Voices” with others, as we seek together to not only archive and share our own valuable histories, but also move our Oklahoma communities and schools forward in embracing the positive learning potentials latent in new digital technologies.

If you have questions about the COV project, please contact me directly at wes@oklahomaheritage.com or by phone toll free at 888-501-2059. The COV Advisory Committee will be meeting in December to schedule workshop dates for 2009, and those will be announced on our learning community website.

