

FEATURE



FILTERING

An Interview



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TEXAS-STYLE:

with **MICHAEL GRAS** and **SCOTT FLOYD**

At the April 2010 Texas Library Association (TLA) Conference in San Antonio, Michael Gras and Scott Floyd from White Oak Independent School District (ISD) were among five presenters at a session on filtering in K–12 schools.

The White Oak ISD's collaborative approach to filtering extends maximum access to Web resources and Web 2.0 tools for students' educational experiences and teachers' instructional needs. Michael and Scott agreed to share their district's approach to meeting the requirements of the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) and the Neighborhood Children's Internet Protection Act (NCIPA), while at the same time preserving the educational integrity of Web searches.

Michael and Scott described White Oak as a small east Texas community of less than 6,000 residents, 125 miles east of Dallas. The city of White Oak

is less than 640 acres, and the school campuses cover about 64 acres. The White Oak Independent School District has 1,350 students and is well supported by its community in everything from athletics to academic endeavors. "White Oak Pride" is real, with several community organizations active in financially supporting the district's "extras." The district is a fairly large consumer of online education and has two teachers who offer classes online through the SUPERNet consortium. Through SUPERNet and the TxVSN, White Oak staff members provide service and support to educational institutions across the state.



MICHAEL GRAS

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Helen Adams: Describe your position and responsibilities at White Oak ISD. What is your background?

Michael Gras: I am the chief of technology but see myself as a technology coordinator. Contrary to the organization chart, I believe I work for the director of curriculum, not the superintendent. Like every technology department, mine is charged with keeping things running. Unlike so many, I feel compelled to be certain that my department pays more than lip service to serving the needs of teachers. Success or failure of our school mission depends on them. My struggle is to support them within the bounds of safety, law, regulation, administration, and budget. I've been at White Oak ten years. In a previous century, I earned a Master's degree in Guidance and Counseling, and taught several science and history classes using chalk and erasers.

HA: What is your personal philosophy about filtering and providing access to educational websites?

MG: From my point of view, a filter exists to protect children from accidentally bumping into unsavory material or getting there through simple searches. No usable filter is perfect, and the best filter is achieved through training the child to behave responsibly. Proactive steps are taken in making sure the students are aware of policies, problem avoidance, and appropriate behaviors. In theory, the "keeper of the filter" in any school district sets that filter to allow content in line with acceptable district education standards to pass unchanged. I believe no single person trained in technology has the appropriate qualifications or even sufficient understanding of faculty and student needs to be the enforcer. Furthermore, I don't believe the technologist has the right to enforce his or her *perceived* standards. What is blocked and unblocked should be shaped by the expressed, not perceived, needs of the users. I look first to teachers, then to administrators. They have the connections to the community at large, whose values we must reflect.

Categories deemed undesirable are indeed blocked, but filtering at White Oak is fluid. Sites are blocked and unblocked at will, according to requests by teachers and administrators.

HA: How do you as technology director for the district meet the requirements of CIPA and NCIPA?

MG: Those requirements are clear, reasonable, and easily met. We filter millions of sites.

HA: Describe filtering of Internet websites and resources in your school district. Does everyone—students K–12, teachers, and administrators—have the same filter?

No amount of filtering protects from lawsuits. Since no filter is perfect, is a nominal reduction in the chance of a lawsuit enough to justify cutting off resources desirable in the classroom? Compliance with CIPA and NCIPA will protect a district from successful suits. Do that instead of acting out of fear.

MG: Every user of school terminals has the same filter. The superintendent can immediately know if a kindergartener can see a site simply by trying to go there.

HA: Can teachers request sites be unblocked? What is the process? What is the approximate amount of time it takes to unblock a site after the request is received?

MG: I block and unblock sites at the written request of any staff member but inform them (and their supervisors) when that change is made. If I'm in the district when the request is made, a site is usually unblocked or blocked in minutes; otherwise, our network technician will take the action after checking with the person's supervisor.

HA: Can students request sites be unblocked? What is the process? Do you find students are bypassing your filters using personal computers or cell phones?

MG: I do not work with students directly on any level. I see my job as building an environment conducive to education as seen by teachers and administrators. The number of students who use proxies or are even expecting access to various blocked sites is rapidly diminishing as parents supply children with Internet-capable phones.

HA: What is your philosophy on the use of Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, vlogs, wikis, podcasts, and others? Are teachers and students using Web 2.0 technologies in White Oaks ISD?

MG: It is interesting to note that in 2009 there was a worldwide shift to social networking in the "most Internet sites visited" category. Currently, more than 22 percent of all Internet traffic is to social networking sites. Those sites are becoming increasingly valuable to the development of a positive Internet identity for both teachers and students. We are making strides toward having online student-created electronic portfolios, which will be critical to our students after graduation. Additionally, having a positive Internet identity is of great value to the personal learning networks of our teachers.

HA: Can teachers and students access YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and similar sites? What is your rationale for permitting access?

MG: Of course. Those sites are the chalkboards of today.

HA: How were you able to convince administrators and your community—parents and others—to accept less restrictive filtering?

MG: I think this question is a bit odd, as I doubt few parents provide any filtering on the home and mobile devices they provide to their children, except perhaps some training on expectations and a fair amount of "over-the-shoulder" supervision. No one wants a child to be exposed to all that is out there. Our community and administrators expect the staff to behave in a professional manner, and that expectation is passed on to our children.

HA: What are the positive and negative aspects of your less-filtered approach?

MG: I don't see the alternative to less-restrictive filtering. I get very few complaints in-house and have not ever received a call from a community member about filtering. One principal has received several complaints from a single parent. Those complaints were handled by very time-consuming teacher training about supervision and equally time-intensive discussion with the student about appropriate behavior in school.

HA: Have there been unintended benefits and consequences to the district's less restrictive filtering?

MG: I have been quite surprised by the number of peers who believe I have abdicated my responsibility and am subjecting my network to uncontrolled influences. I have a benefit that no controlling network administrator in a "walled garden" ever will have—the resources of the Internet as perceived, explored, and included in classroom instruction by our teaching professionals.

HA: Administrators often fear what students may see while using district computers, so are frequently more interested in keeping filtering levels high to "protect" students and avoid lawsuits from parents. What is your advice to administrators who favor strict filtering to provide safe access to students using district computers to access the Internet?

MG: No amount of filtering protects from lawsuits. Since no filter is perfect, is a nominal reduction in the chance of a lawsuit enough to justify cutting off resources desirable in the classroom? Compliance with CIPA and NCIPA will protect a district from successful suits. Do that instead of acting out of fear. I'm glad to see your use of the word "protect" in quotes. High levels of filtering make the Internet unusable, and students will go elsewhere. In that space, they will likely be unsupervised and not taught how to correctly behave on the "Net."

HA: Since the implementation of CIPA and NCIPA, many school librarians have been battling to obtain more access to relevant, educational websites for use by teachers and students. What advice can you give school librarians working in a strictly filtered environment?

MG: I would ask the librarian what action would be taken if the library was too hot or too cold and maintenance refused to adjust the temperature because they considered it safe and good enough. I would ask if it were acceptable to add another layer controlled by non-readers, to the layers already existing that approve books for purchase. I would ask if it were acceptable for a typesetter to restrict content in the library....Here is the picture: The wrong people are in charge. If that is perceived as part of a losing battle, there is not much that can be offered by way of advice. In essence, if one is working under untenable conditions, seek new conditions within or without.



SCOTT FLOYD

INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGIST

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Helen Adams: Describe your position and responsibilities at White Oak ISD. What is your background?

Scott Floyd: I am the district instructional technologist. This position was created three years ago to aid the expansion of technology integration and to allow our community to see what happens in our schools' classrooms by virtual means. I am able to work with all staff on curriculum and the integration of technology. I also work with students at teacher request, and some high school students ask me personally to assist them with projects. I began teaching first grade in White Oak Independent School District in 1997. I moved to the middle school, where I taught English and reading, as well as being the gifted and talented coordinator, and also spent a year teaching debate at the high school. I have a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in literacy.

Web 2.0 tools allow "21st-century" skills to be practiced by both staff and students in a safe environment in an educational setting. "Educational setting" means a monitored, safe-to-fail environment. This also changes the role of the teacher to learner. It is a hard shift for some staff to make, but if you cannot walk into your classroom prepared to learn from the students, you might want to consider a different field of work.

HA: As an instructional technologist, what is your personal philosophy about filtering and providing access to educational websites? From an instructional perspective, is filtering effective?

SF: Filtering is mostly effective when the person controlling it consults with the curriculum department regularly about policies and changes. To leave the decision in one person's hand (generally not an educator) to decide what gets through and what does not makes absolutely no sense. The need to unblock a site should come from the classroom. The solution should arise from collaboration and cooperation of the technology and curriculum departments. In White Oak ISD, the Technology Department falls under the Curriculum and Instruction Department. We are here to serve the students and staff. They should not be held back because of the Technology Department.

HA: Describe how you work with Michael Gras, the chief of technology, within the confines of required filters, to improve teachers' use of instructional technology and affect student learning.

SF: We monitor how sites are categorized within the filtering system. Good, useful sites may get incorrectly classified as inappropriate by the filtering software and reviewers. Knowing the educational value of a site is imperative for proper filtering. The site's educational value is defined by our instructional staff, including me. Michael relies on that collaborative relationship to manage the filtering.

HA: What is your philosophy on the use of Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, vlogs, wikis, podcasts, and others?

SF: These types of tools allow the "21st-century" skills to be practiced by both staff and students in a safe environment in an educational setting. "Educational setting" means a monitored, *safe-to-fail* environment. This changes the role of the teacher to learner. It is a hard shift for some staff to make, but if you cannot walk into your classroom prepared to learn from the students, you might want to consider a different field of work.

HA: Are Web 2.0 technologies integrated into your district's curricula and used in various disciplines? At all grade levels?

SF: Most grades use Web 2.0 tools regularly. In the primary grades, teachers utilize podcasting (audio and video) to showcase students in readers' theater and digital storytelling. Parents absolutely love being able to see the work their kids are doing in the classroom, even when parents cannot be there. We also use streaming video for awards ceremonies, so that parents can be a part of the school day while at work or wherever they have Web access. We have a middle school teacher who uses blogs and video podcasts for Web publication purposes. Students are excited to see their work on the Web, and to have the opportunity to share their work with their peers and family members.

HA: Your district does not filter teacher and student use of YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and similar sites. Are these sites used instructionally, professionally by faculty, for personal use, or for a combination of uses?

SF: Have you seen the content on YouTube these days? One great example that comes to mind is the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum video collection that is hosted there. It is extremely valuable to be able to pull up YouTube and show the kids the videos that they might see only by traveling to the museum, which most will never do. [Viewing the videos] engages them in the lessons. We have a Spanish teacher who uses Twitter to allow her students to practice Spanish in written contexts. They are learning conversational uses, spelling, and translating in one useful tool. They send questions to the teacher on it as well. She replies in Spanish, and students must be ready to translate. The websites listed above (YouTube, et al.) are used in all of the ways you listed—instructional, professional, and personal. Do we check to see if our teachers are on Facebook all day long? No, our administrators treat our teachers as professionals. We have staff who use these tools as part of their professional learning networks. Why would we shut down their active, personal learning?

HA: In your TLA Conference presentation, you mentioned having approximately eight hundred blogs in your district. How are they used? How are they used?

Take a serious look at the world into which your students are graduating. How well are you preparing them for that unfiltered world? Does your school have a physical alcohol filter in place? Does it have a physical no smoking filter in place?....How are those kids going to cope with those things when they see them in the real world if you sheltered them completely while they were in your school building?

SF: Both students and staff can create as many blogs as they wish. We have unlimited space and support through our Edublogs Campus account, so we encourage the extended use of these tools. If a staff member decides to create a personal blog about some family event (birth of a child, vacation, etc.), we look at that as an opportunity for them to increase their skills in this environment.

Our blogs are used for electronic portfolios, as well as classroom blogs. Teachers utilize them as communication tools with the “educational” community. That community might be local, or it might be one from the other side of the world. Students are part of international blogging and commenting on projects regularly. It is great practice of communication and literacy skills.

One example is a blog used for a special education class. Those students have been participating in international projects and competitions via their blog for years. They have won awards for

their media creation. It is tough for some kids to catch a break in their educational careers due to learning issues. Being able to provide students with those learning opportunities through a different medium is a blessing.

HA: During your presentation, you also mentioned that your district cannot train students to be safe searchers if they cannot get to sites to learn. How do you and other instructional staff teach students to be responsible online users?

SF: My role is simple—support the projects and advancement of objectives instead of being a roadblock. I provide the experienced voice that teachers may need when in uncharted waters.

My major involvement is guiding staff. I reinforce with students, but teachers are the instructional leaders students see every day. Once the staff understands responsible use, they can move kids through the process right down to the questions to ask when coming across something online that is questionable. New sites are created

every day, so no one can be 100 percent protected. That is where that critical reflection occurs with students. Students see models of acceptable use, for example, when teachers use alternative sites that search and view YouTube videos without the hazards of “Related Videos” coming into play. Our intermediate campus, grades 3–5, has a safety course students take that gives them a “license to drive the Internet” when they successfully complete it. They receive “citations” if they make errors in judgment (like putting too much identifiable information on a blog or not searching Google with the safety settings on) and have to earn their “license” back through training courses if they receive too many citations. Our acceptable use policy is worded to allow wide use of Web 2.0 tools, based on the needs that arise from classroom instruction. Parents and students are made aware, at the beginning of the year, that a variety of sites will be used and appropriate use is the expectation.

HA: What is your advice to administrators who favor strict filtering to “protect” students using school computers?

SF: Take a serious look at the world into which your students are graduating. How well are you preparing them for that unfiltered world? Does your school have a physical alcohol filter in place? Does it have a physical no-smoking filter in place? Do you have some way to detect if the student has a pornographic magazine in the backpack? Hmm. How are kids going to cope with those things when they see them in the real world if you sheltered them completely while they were in your school building? Same solution: Teach them.

HA: What are the positive and negative aspects of your district's less-filtered approach?

SF: The positive aspect of less filtering is that our staff and students have a pretty wide-open landscape to learn. It is a lot like college in some instances. Students can define what they are interested in learning and study that with little interference. One of the less-positive aspects is the push-back we get from staff in other districts who feel we are not doing the right thing. Although the criticism does not do any harm directly, it can cause indirect harm when misleading information is spread around. We still filter the bad stuff. We filter what the law requires. We just don't filter everything else.

HA: Have there been unintended benefits and consequences of using less-restrictive filtering?

SF: Our teachers have become very innovative in the sites they use in the classroom for instructional or publishing purposes. They find things that fit their needs and show off their students' abilities. A great example is Smilebox <www.smilebox.com/slideshows>, a site that allows easy photo and video uploads into templates that automatically add themed transitions and music. Smilebox slideshows are showing up on all of the elementary blogs. Parents get to see projects, activities, and other special events without the teacher spending a lot of time creating displays. When you consider it could take hours to create a physical display of student work that will be seen by only a few parents, using Smilebox is both

a smart and efficient choice. Also, since time is a valuable resource for teachers, finding ways to save it is a bonus. The time saved can be better spent creating engaging lessons and providing students with constructive feedback in core areas.

A second unintended benefit has been that we have better traffic flow on our network. Since the students can go where they need to go, they are not using proxies to get around the filter.

On the negative side, new inappropriate sites are created daily with the sole intention of getting you to go to them. Many do this in an underhanded manner and can slip through any filter in place. The bonus is when a student or staff member finds it and makes the right choice. Then you know you've done your job.

HA: Is there anything else you would like to communicate to KQ's readers?

SF: The one philosophical difference between our school district and most others is the alignment of departments and leadership. With the Technology Department firmly under the direction of the Curriculum and Instruction Department, and the curriculum department in touch with teacher and student needs, we know that our goals are aligned and that we are all working toward providing the best possible learning environment for our students. We also know we are providing a wonderful teaching atmosphere for our staff. That helps retain our extremely qualified and dedicated staff.

