

The whole world in their hands

www.rafi.ki is an international social networking site, like Facebook, for students and teachers. Teacher **Sam Eyre**

shares how his students have used it to make new friends and spark new ideas with teenagers from around the world.



The need to give students an international perspective is now set in the curriculum. Personal interaction with children in other countries can be a powerful experience that breaks down stereotypes. But restrictions on expense and time make visits difficult.

Luckily, the internet offers an easy way to go beyond trips to Europe and pen pal schemes. For teachers, it's an opportunity to open pupils' eyes to the world.

Two years ago, my school joined an international web-based community. We now collaborate with other educational institutions all over the world. *www.Rafi.ki* (which means 'friend' in Swahili) works like Facebook - but was designed solely for teachers and students.

As a teacher of art and photography, I have always been

interested in online learning, and I encourage students to share work over social networks. But I have concerns about these sites in the classroom because of safety and security issues - not to mention the distraction from work. When I heard the Rafi.ki network gave teachers full control over what can be accessed, I started to get intrigued. I was also reassured by its remote monitoring system - which is run by trained facilitators.

I wanted to explore the site on my own before introducing it to students. In the end, I used it for nearly a year before bringing it into the classroom. This is not a criticism of the site. If anything, this shows how varied its uses are. I used Rafi.ki as a resource for various cross-curricular projects. I also used it with other teachers and swapped ideas.

Seeds

The introduction of the New Secondary Curriculum in september 2008 seemed a natural time to introduce a 'global dimension' into our lessons. Our school, a specialist media comprehensive co-ed secondary school in Devon, has already received an 'International School Award' from the DCSF for our global curriculum. Rafi.ki took that work into a wider context.

We hold an *International Links* week annually in the summer term. This is a celebration of international cultures with lots of events for the children. One day workshops are held within school departments - like 'multi-cultural cooking', 'collaborative cultural art works' and 'geographical research' projects.

We used the week to explore aspects of the New Secondary Curriculum. Us teachers wanted to create a deeper learning experience with a more cross-curricular approach in planning and delivery. To boost media use, we decided to explore and develop new technologies - digital art, photography, videos and ICT. Rafi.ki was a way of communicating, sharing and celebrating our ideas with partner schools overseas.

Saplings

The timetable was abandoned for two days for year seven students. This gave teachers freedom over how they used the school day. The art and geography departments decided to work together to plan and deliver their 'day learning experience'. The theme was 'tree planting'.

The tree planting idea came from a previous *Connecting Classrooms* project during *International Links* week. Teachers from our school had been to a conference in Nigeria and had joined in a tree-planting project.

In the art department, students worked on a land art project with a local gallery in a local forest. We bought and were donated saplings by local businesses. We tried to collect trees from around the world to use as an educational resource.

Students were encouraged to research where the trees came from, how to plant a tree and to record the event creatively. Their made digital art works to express their experiences. We used computers to present research information, record our work and create artworks based on the day.

Students created their own profile pages on Rafi.ki as a starting point for sharing their work with peers in African countries. They then made 'tree planting' pages to share their research, photographs and video clips from the day. This work was done in the 'project section' on Rafi.ki to add an extra dimension to classwork.

You can also sign up to join projects on Rafi.ki. In these chatrooms, you can communicate with students around

the world. Teachers can share practice ideas. The 'profile' and 'work' pages enable teachers to share worksheets, images, web links, photos, video clips and podcasts.

I first introduced my GCSE photography students to the internet to encourage them to think about how artists and photographers work in the modern world. To become successful, they need to publicise themselves and their work. Rafi.ki's web design tool helps students design webpages and profile pages to share their art with the world. These pages can also count as coursework.



Introducing students to the web design element was easy - the tools are simple and straight forward. There are excellent help pages on the site, and support is available from the facilitators who offer quick, friendly advice. Students used the site intuitively almost immediately. They soon found they could instant message each other across the class and into the world. It became a competition in one class to see who could talk to pupils from the most countries.

Students designed photography pages and asked their peers from around the world to critique their work.

This led to some great interactions, and helped to break down our West Country isolation.

Students made electronic pen pals and discussed personal and social issues

with them, as well as schoolwork. I hadn't seen this level of wider, social and cultural learning before I used Rafi.ki. I believe this kind of communication between young adults can offer huge benefits.

I also think it helps that students can log on outside school and continue the dialogue. Then learning becomes instinctive, natural and fun. What do students do when they get home? Log on to Facebook, MySpace and Twitter.

Rafi.ki was a way of communicating, sharing and celebrating our ideas with partner schools overseas.

Rafi.ki offers the same benefits, but in a safe environment with a focus on learning.

Trees

Rafi.ki is not without its quirks. Its unique format is not always easy to understand. You also have to remember that it is web-based - so pressing the wrong back button takes you out of the site and you have to begin again. Restrictions on file upload can slow work down - especially because it doesn't have a multiple image uploader. But on the whole, the access to the globe and its classrooms Rafi.ki provides is an amazing tool with many uses.

I'm also impressed by Rafi.ki's flexibility. You can browse existing projects, explore new ideas with other teachers and tailor programmes to your needs. At the other end of the scale, you can join a project community with the potential to videoconference between classes. I've heard of a German teacher in the UK who uses Rafi.ki to set up a relationship with a German school and hold lessons online - with half the time spent learning German and the other half learning English. This takes peer-to-peer learning to a new level.

As part of my role as the South West regional subject advisor for the New Curriculum I have used Rafi.ki at conferences in Devon, Cornwall and Somerset, enabling teachers to communicate and share work across the South West. I think this technology has come at exactly the right point given the current climate for innovative education. It needs further exploration and has not yet been fully embedded into our curriculum. But we are pioneers, and we look forward to seeing what else we can do.

What is Rafi.ki?

Rafi.ki is a not-for-profit online community designed just for schools. It uses cutting edge, simple to use technology and it is funded by the DfES, DfID and the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation. It enables schools to work with each other simply and effectively across the world. Please visit www.rafi.ki.

Sam Eyre is an art and photography teacher at Coombeshead College - as well as the South West regional subject advisor for the New Curriculum.

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