



“Don’t go overboard trying to spruce up projects with digital bells and whistles.”

# Engaging Students with AASL’s Best Websites for Teaching and Learning

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## INTRODUCTION

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Best Websites for Teaching and Learning Committee created its first list of 25 winning websites in the summer of 2009. When the committee originated as a task force in 2008, it was charged with honoring websites, educational resources of high caliber, and inquiry-based teaching and online learning tools as represented in the 'AASL's *Standards of the 21st Century Learner*. Each year the committee offers a new list of websites that foster innovation, creativity, active participation, and collaboration. They are free, user-friendly sites that encourage teachers and learners to explore, discover, and promote critical thinking. In June 2012, the committee will be presenting their 100th website. Committee members spend an arduous year reviewing sites, commiserating over their value to the fields of teaching and learning, and choosing online tools best suited to win for that year. Over 100 websites will be reviewed each year before the final 25 are chosen.

## WEBSITE SELECTION CRITERIA

In order for sites to be considered, the committee has developed a list of evaluation criteria, which includes free access to a majority of the site, user friendliness, low percentage of advertisements, age appropriateness of existing advertisements, strong curricular integration, innovation, promotion of collaborative teaching and learning, and facilitation of a community of learning. Websites are nominated by committee members, school librarians, and public recommendations on the committee's website (<http://www.ala.org/aasl/guidelinesandstandards/bestlist/bestwebsitesnomination>). Sites are reviewed and evaluated in a variety of settings, some of which include individual practice, one-on-one with students, classroom situations, and school libraries. Once sites are chosen, they are placed in categories: digital storytelling, management and organization, content collaboration, curriculum sharing, social networking and communication, media sharing, and content resources.

In 2009, two different lists were created. Because this was the launch year for the AASL Best Websites list, there was a best list and a Landmark Websites list. The Landmark Websites were honored for exemplary histories of authoritative, engaging content and curricular relevance. These sites were also free, user-friendly, and encouraged learners to explore and discover. The sites were organized in three categories: content resources, lesson plans

and more; collaboration; and global education. Following are some examples of sites on the Landmark list.

## CONTENT RESOURCES, LESSON PLANS AND MORE

Discovery Education (<http://community.discoveryeducation.com/>) offers lesson plans, grants, science help, and more. Kathy Shrock's guide to educators is housed here as well.

The Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/index.html>) provides over 13 million digitized primary sources.

Read Write Think (<http://www.readwritethink.org/>) focuses on learning language, learning through language, and learning about language. This is a great site for any language arts, ESL, or English teacher.

## COLLABORATION

Moodle (<http://moodle.org/>) is a free course-management tool that can be used in elementary through college classrooms. Moodle allows teachers to create Internet-based courses and websites. With open source software, anyone can create sites for their students to use in and for class.

## GLOBAL EDUCATION

Google Earth (<http://www.google.com/earth/index.html>) provides a three-dimen-

sional view of the earth, ocean, and sky. This innovative product lets classes explore the globe in a way that has never been done before.

These are only a few of the sites from the Landmark list. Though these sites may be considered foundational or early in the field of educational websites, they should not be discounted as useful and dynamic in content. All of the Landmark sites are current and have moved forward as the web entered the 2.0 era and mobile technologies were integrated into people's daily lives. Many of these sites now have apps to download, two-way interactions for students and teachers, video streaming, and much more. Don't let the Landmark status fool you; these sites earned a best website ranking as well.

In 2009 the Best Websites Committee also released their first list, and a list has been released each subsequent year during a summer presentation at the American Library Association (ALA) annual conference. Here is a sampling of winners from the past three years.

## MANAGE AND ORGANIZE

Diigo (<http://www.diigo.com/>) is a social bookmarking site that lets users save and tag websites, add sticky notes and annotations, and share them with other users in various groups.

Spicy Nodes (<http://www.spicynodes.org/>) is a concept-mapping presentation tool that allows users to embed pictures, videos, websites, and more. It is very intuitive and fun to use.

## CONTENT COLLABORATION

Polleverywhere (<http://www.polleverywhere.com/>) is a voting platform that can be used in classrooms and libraries to gather answers to any question. Students and users can vote by sending a text message via phone or on the web.

## DIGITAL STORYTELLING

International Children's Digital Library (<http://en.childrenslibrary.org/>) contains

the largest digital collection of children's books, with over 4,400 books in 54 languages representing 64 countries, with applications for the iPhone and iPad.

## SOCIAL NETWORKING AND COMMUNICATION

Ted (<http://www.ted.com/>) is a well-known website that shares ideas from the world's most innovative thinkers and experts related to technology, entertainment, design, business, science, and global issues.

Edmodo (<http://www.edmodo.com/>) is a secure online learning network for teachers and students. It gives libraries and classrooms a safe and easy place to connect and collaborate, share ideas and content, and access homework, grades, and school announcements.

## MEDIA SHARING

Tagxedo (<http://www.tagxedo.com/>) allows users to create fantastic projects with word clouds. Choose a picture or shape,

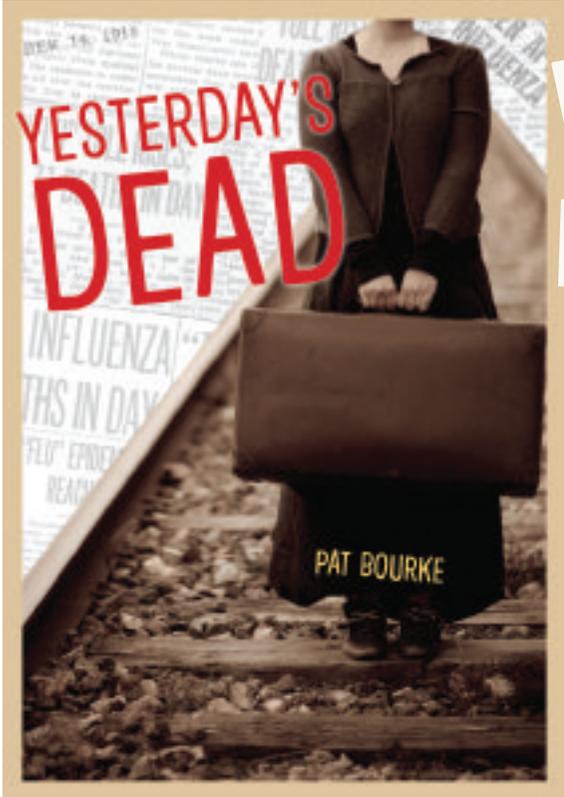
then add words and make a visually enticing display. Tagxedo can be used to demonstrate speeches, reports, or anything you can imagine.

## CURRICULUM SHARING

Khan Academy (<http://www.khanacademy.org/>) is an incredibly popular, fast-growing video library that provides thousands of videos with alternative, engaging instruction in math, physics, finance, and history. Always expanding and improving, this is a rich resource for instruction and learning.

## CONTENT RESOURCES: LESSON PLANS AND MORE

Lingt Language (<http://lingtlanguage.com/>) allows students to practice foreign language skills online. Teachers can build assignments that use voice, video, images, and text, and students can interact with posted assignments.



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