

Teachers Swap Recipes

Educators use web sites and social networks to share lesson plans

By BILL TUCKER

In every school in America, in three-ring binders and file folders, sit lesson plans—the recipes that guide everyday teaching in the classroom. Like the secrets of talented cooks, the instructional plans of the best teachers have much to offer their creators' colleagues. But while the plans are increasingly digital, they are still not easily shared across classrooms, nor, especially, across districts or states. Even when these plans are accessible, they are often not organized in a way that makes them easy to use, understand, or customize.

Now, a host of new web sites, from A to Z Teacher Stuff to Lesson Planet to Lessonopoly, are trying to solve that problem and make it easier for teachers to share, find, and make better use of lesson plans and accompanying materials. One, TeachersPayTeachers, a sort of Craigslist for educators, says it has paid more than \$1 million in commissions to teachers, who have sold everything from classroom hand puppets to lesson plans on the Civil War. The site even hosts a “lesson plan on demand” auction, in which teachers advertise for, say, 4th-grade materials on Texas history and other teachers bid to fulfill the request.

But context matters. Teachers want to know whether something will work with their instructional style, in their classroom, and for their kids. Trust matters, too. While the sites offer ratings by users and rankings of the most popular items, these may not identify the highest-quality offerings. So how do novice teachers, who lack experience developing lessons and stand to benefit the most, know that a lesson plan will actually be effective? The answer may not lie in cyberspace, but in real communities.

One of the most promising new entrants to the growing online market of lesson plans is BetterLesson, a small Cambridge, Massachusetts, company started by former

educators that has been called the “Facebook for teachers.” Any teacher can join for free, manage her lesson plans, organize teaching materials, and share (or not) with her school, a wider professional learning community, or the entire world. As with Facebook, the site's technology and user interface are sharp, and users can easily register a positive reaction, in this case by clicking “Helpful.” But more important, BetterLesson shares Facebook's initial focus on social networks and trusting relationships that already exist. While the site is currently open to any teacher, the company wants to leverage existing communities—school networks, alumni groups, and grade or subject affinity groups—that already share an identity and language around teaching.

BetterLesson's Intranet package targets existing school networks. One early adopter, Achievement First, the highly regarded network of public charter schools in Connecticut and New York, is tailoring BetterLesson to extend the work of its instructional coaches and teacher learning communities. A coach working with a teacher can share concrete examples from the lesson plans and videos of effective teachers. “Remember what we were talking about at our last professional development session?” she can say. “Well, this is what it looks like.”

Since the examples are drawn from schools with similar cultures, expectations, and records of achievement, they are more likely to be trusted and used. As of February 2011, Achievement First had logged 15,000 downloads. KIPP and Rocketship Education (see “Future Schools,” page 10) have also signed on. In the first semester of use, KIPP teachers downloaded more than 20,000 lessons and related materials. But in the wider teaching community, BetterLesson has plenty of competition (see Figure 1).

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Dan Cogan-Drew, Achievement First's director of digital learning, emphasizes that the BetterLesson tools build on school cultures that are already collaborative. They are "an extension of the relationships that coaches are building with teachers," he says, adding, "If it works for us, it's because of the people and structure we have."

Andrew Mandel, a vice president in charge of Teach For America's Resource Exchange, a similar set of tools for TFA members, agrees with the importance of extending existing relationships. He says that TFA's successful site is "not so much about the technology. [We're] much more concerned with the user side." This past fall, 75 percent of TFA's 8,131 members downloaded materials from its site. And more than half of Achievement First's 19 schools were active on BetterLesson in its first full year of use.

It is these real-world ties, along with recognition from their peers, that motivate successful teachers to spend the time and energy to organize and upload their materials. The site's ease of use, as well as the tools to organize a teacher's own lessons, is also critical. But sharing lesson plans is not just a one-way exchange. Teachers can also get feedback to ensure that their lessons are always improving.

There are other rewards, including one not normally associated with teaching but always possible on the Internet: fame. While teachers can keep their lessons within their trusted networks, they can also share them in such a way that they end up "going viral." Alex Grodd, BetterLesson's founder, former 6th-grade English teacher, and Teach For America alum, says it's important for these networks to live on the same platform so that teachers

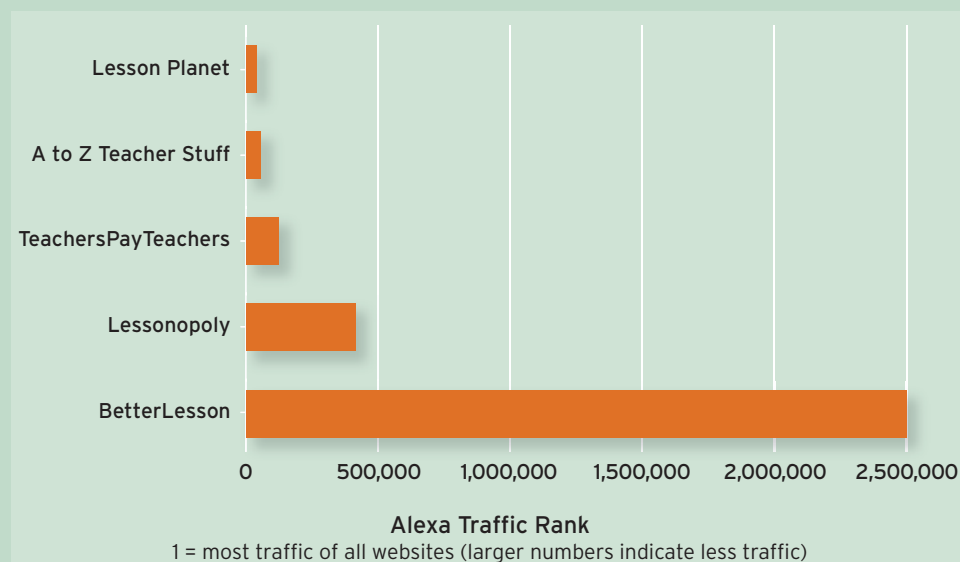
can share beyond their individual networks, between districts and charters, and even across countries. The site can also offer outsiders a glimpse inside the classroom, notes Cogan-Drew; he says it lets prospective Achievement First teachers "step into our world."

Just as *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* can't magically transform a kitchen rookie into Julia Child, great lesson plans won't turn novice teachers into experts. But the plans can help those novices lighten their load, allowing them to focus on other areas like classroom management and student engagement. As for the great teachers, they now have a way to capture tangible artifacts of what's working and to spread them across hundreds of classrooms. And even the best chefs borrow recipes from each other. Highly effective veterans are constantly looking for ways to improve specific components of their instruction, such as opening up an explanation of quadratic equations. Perhaps sometime soon, we'll see great lesson plans join the Star Wars kid, piano-playing kittens, and sneezing pandas as Internet sensations.

Bill Tucker is managing director of Education Sector.

Comparing Teacher-Help Websites (Figure 1)

So far, the more-customized BetterLesson ranks far behind its peers in attracting Internet traffic.



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