Social Networking in Latin Class: A How-To Guide

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Abstract

Social networking is not a new concept. People form groups (like CAMWS, ACL, and APA) to talk about things in common. With the Internet, these common-interest groups proliferate online, enabling people worldwide to converse on topics pertinent to their groups. The most recent online phenomenon, social networking, allows people to engage in dialogue while adding content like audio, video, digital images, and documents, and at the same time permits members of these online communities to comment and give feedback on this content. Latin teachers at any level can take advantage of blogging and file-sharing offered by social networking sites like Ning and Facebook to create dynamic, educational environments in which students can interact with each other, as well as the instructor, in pursuit of understanding the Latin discussed in class. Young people already feel that they have ownership of Web 2.0 platforms. Teachers can further empower their students to learn Latin via these platforms by creating classroom social networks. These platforms are both free and easy to use. This paper illustrates how to create a private social network for a sample AP Vergil class using the Ning social network creation tool.

Keywords

Latin, Ning, Social Networking, Classroom 2.0, Web 2.0, eLearning, Classics

Introduction

The most important thing a Latin teacher can do for his or her students is engage them with the subject and turn them into lifelong learners of Latin specifically and of Classics in general. With contemporary students, sneaking in saucy Catullus poems on the sly, assigning the fun bits of Suetonius on occasion for extra credit, and talking about Roman latrines and Flavian hairstyles sparks curiosity and fires the imagination. All too often, though, the dialogue remains in the classroom, and often the exploration of cultural threads stops before it can build a head of steam, or the meaning of what Vergil wrote gets lost in translation because of the outrageous pacing of the Advanced Placement syllabus. So how do you maintain student interest in Latin and Classics outside of class, engaging them in the material on their own time, and keep following threads of class- or reading-generated discussions without feeling rushed, giving some time to the students so they can explore these discussion topics?

The answer lies within new Internet technology, namely those tools classed under the general heading of "Web 2.0". These tools include blogs (online diaries/journals), wikis (publicly edited spaces for shared information), and social networks (groups of individuals with shared interests). Many Classicists over the age of 30 (I count myself in this number) grew up with (or adapted to) the Internet as a one-way conduit of information. The Internet was a way to

provide data quickly from one person/group to another. Content-providers sat on one side of the Internet, and information consumers were on the other side. With the advent in the past few years of Web 2.0 technologies, we have entered an age of information sharing. Everyone has an opinion or knows something, and there is a genuine, democratic feel to the new Internet in that it encourages debate and collaboration, basically peer review in real-time.

With Web 1.0, we had static websites that provided information to curious people. With Web 2.0, we have dynamic websites that encourage comments from the public. While there is still an attitude among many scholars that this dialogue can lead to false information or bad data, we can choose to take control of the dialogue and provide accurate information and good data borne out of experience and research.

With Web 1.0, we had (and still have) two-dimensional user groups where members communicate(d) via email discussion lists. The best example of this for *Teaching Classical Languages* readers is the Latinteach list. Members send email to the main list address and then other members can choose to respond. While lists like these are beneficial, the dialogue is often not in real-time (like an organic conversation), and fails to take advantage of the new things offered by Web 2.0 tools.

With Web 2.0, we see the evolution of the email discussion list/special interest group into something that is three-dimensional: social networking sites. Readers of *Teaching Classical Languages* might already have heard of (or be current members of) MySpace or Facebook, massive websites where people can sign up for free and network or reconnect with friends, colleagues, classmates, and others who share similar interests. On Facebook (www.facebook.com), there are millions of members including teachers and students and Classics-related groups on everything from reception studies to teacher fan clubs.

Social networks allow members to upload images, documents, audio and video; create and comment on blog entries; participate in discussions; share website links; and more. Students already feel that they have ownership of social networks like Facebook. As teachers who are looking for ways to connect with students on their own terms, using the technology that students are comfortable with is a step in the right direction. By creating a social networking environment as part of the class experience, students can contribute to their Latin classes by feeling that they are part-owners in the courses that they take. If the students feel that they have ownership of some of the content within the context of their Latin classes, they will spend more time on Latin, and will often find creative and thoughtful ways of having fun with a subject that can, for many students, be difficult or even soulless.

Teachers now have the ability to create their own Web 2.0 sites for their classes. High school Latin teacher Bob Patrick uses a blog for his AP Latin classes. Distance-learning Classics educator Laura Gibbs uses private social networks for her online courses.

For an actively used Classics-themed Ning social network with audio, video, discussions, a blog, and digital images, visit http://eclassics.ning.com, created by this author to help teachers help themselves understand how to use classroom technology in support of learning ancient languages. At the time of publication, the site had over 900 members from nearly 50 countries.

London-based scholar Evan Millner has developed a number of Web 2.0 sites for Latin, most notably Schola (Ning-created), Latinum, and Imaginum Vocabularium.

Schola (http://schola.ning.com/) is an all-Latin language, informal social network where anyone with a yen to practice their Latin composition is free to do so. Members are invited to comment, add corrections, and help each other with the Latin they create.

Latinum (http://latinum.mypodcast.com/) is an extensive site containing hundreds of lessons in spoken Classical Latin, presented as MP3 audio, based on a free introductory Latin textbook in PDF format. In addition, Latinum provides vocabulary drills and a wide range of Classical and other readings.

Imaginum Vocabularium (http://imaginumvocabulariumlatinum.blogspot.com/) is an image-based blog to help with vocabulary learning via visuals--an online pictionary.

Classroom 2.0 (http://www.classroom20.com/) is a Ning-created social network dedicated to teachers in any subject who are interested in using technology to help teach. With over 10,000 members, help is readily available, and is a sign that this kind of technology is already present and growing in support of all levels of education.

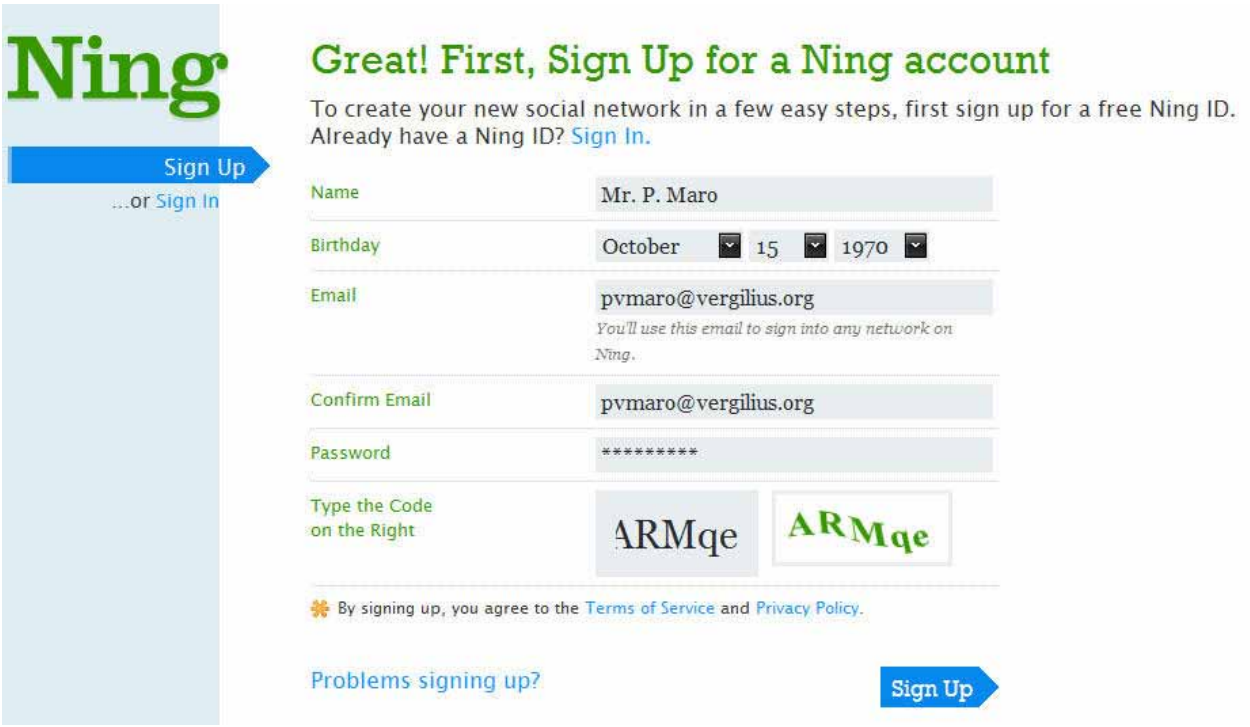
Teachers now have the ability to create their own Web 2.0 sites for their classes. Distance-learning Classics educator Laura Gibbs uses social networks, blogs, and wikis for her online courses (http://www.mythfolklore.net/). High school Latin teacher Bob Patrick uses blogs (http://www.carminacatulli.blogspot.com/ and http://latinatironibus.blogspot.com/) and, more recently, private social networks for his AP Latin classes, too, created on Ning.com.

Educators are beginning to leverage Web 2.0 technologies into their classes with good results. The balance of this article will show *Teaching Classical Languages* readers how easy it is to both create and manage a classroom social network in support of AP Vergil, step-by-step. No programming skill is required; pre-made artistic "themes" are available to those teachers who don't have the time to fuss with graphic design, and the creation of content is quick and easy requiring a few minutes a day to post news, homework assignments, and reminders. The students are responsible for the rest.

Creating Your Latin Class Network with Ning

"Ning" is a social network creation tool. This means that you can create your own Facebook-style groups online for free for any/all of your Latin classes. It takes about thirty minutes to set up a basic site, and then it's up to both you and your students to create content on a day-to-day basis. This content can include class assignments, uploading multimedia, posting news about tests and quizzes, commenting on the blog, and more. Go to ning.com to get started.

Ning-created sites do require their creators and members to have a unique Ning ID (a username and password) in order to log in. If you don't have a Ning ID, both you and your students will need to get one. Membership is free and does not ask for any personal information. The only requirement is that you have an e-mail address (any e-mail address will do, be it one for your school, or simply a gmail.com or mac.com account, among others). At the time of publication, the site had over 1,100 members from nearly 50 countries.



Create your Classroom Network

Ning asks that you describe the purpose of this network; this brief description is what appears in the top-left corner of the site once the network is launched. You should also make the network private so that only you and your students can access it. As an instructor and manager of the site, it is up to you to invite your students in. You can lock the network down so that only you have the power to invite people to the site. If other people stumble upon your network, they will be prompted to log in to get to the homepage. Without the proper login credentials, they will only be able to see the name of your network, but will be blocked from all class data, membership, media, and other content.

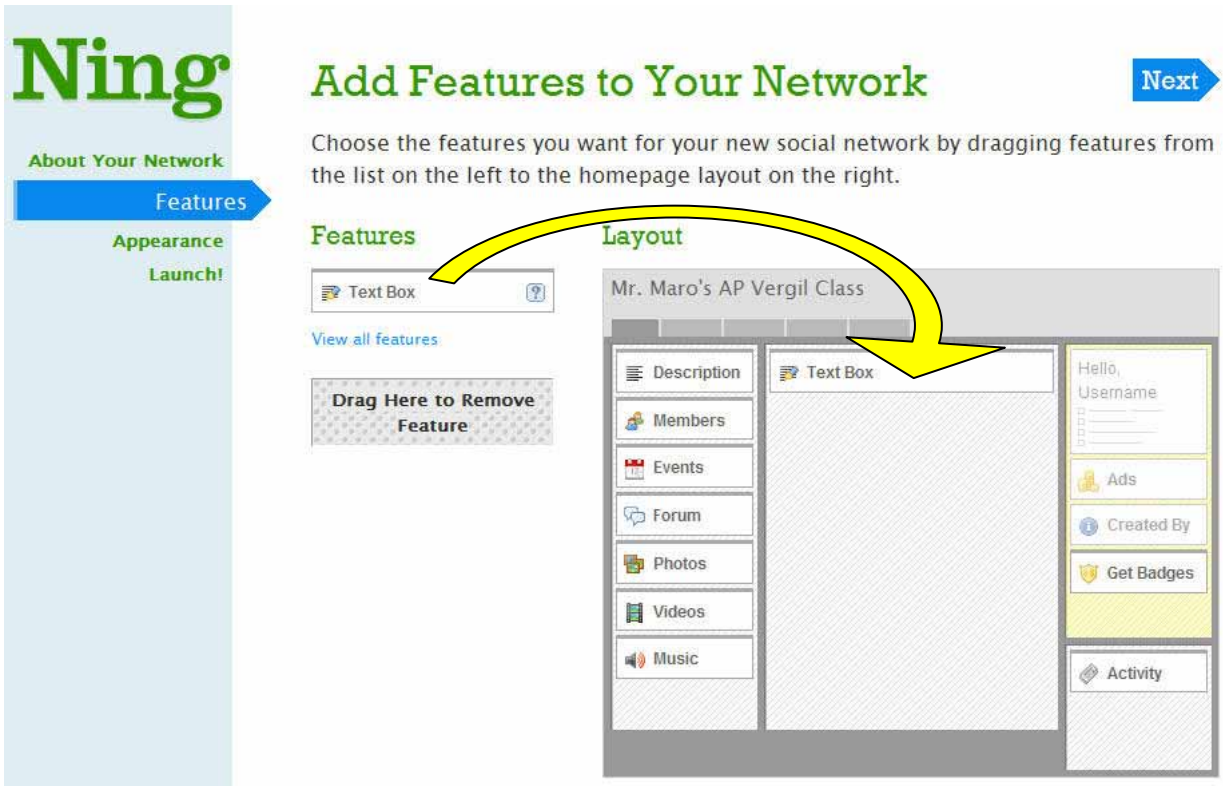
Educators are beginning to leverage Web 2.0 technologies into their classes with good results. Bob Patrick teaches at Parkview High School in Lilburn, Georgia, where he has used private, classroom blogs with his AP Latin Literature and AP Vergil students, specifically for practicing essay writing for the AP exams. He graded these online essays with the AP essay rubrics.

After speaking with Web 2.0 maven and teacher Laura Gibbs of the University of Oklahoma, Patrick decided to give Ning-created social networking sites a try in his classes. As Patrick succinctly puts it, he likes Nings because they "combine elements of a website, a blog, a discussion group, a calendar, email, chat groups, and social networking all in one easy-to-set-up place". Patrick did have to contact Ning.com to request all advertising to be removed from the site which Ning did at no charge because he was educating students who were younger than college-age.

Patrick keeps his classroom Nings private, just for his own use and that of his students. He did give his students some training on how to use the site, and then jumped right in posting the syllabus online, using the Events calendar for assignments, creating student blogs on Vergil. Students are encouraged to comment on the blogs as part of their quiz grades. An added bonus to using Nings is that Patrick's classes are nearly paper-free.

"I'm happier. The students are happier. Mother Earth is happier. It's a trifecta of happiness," Patrick said.

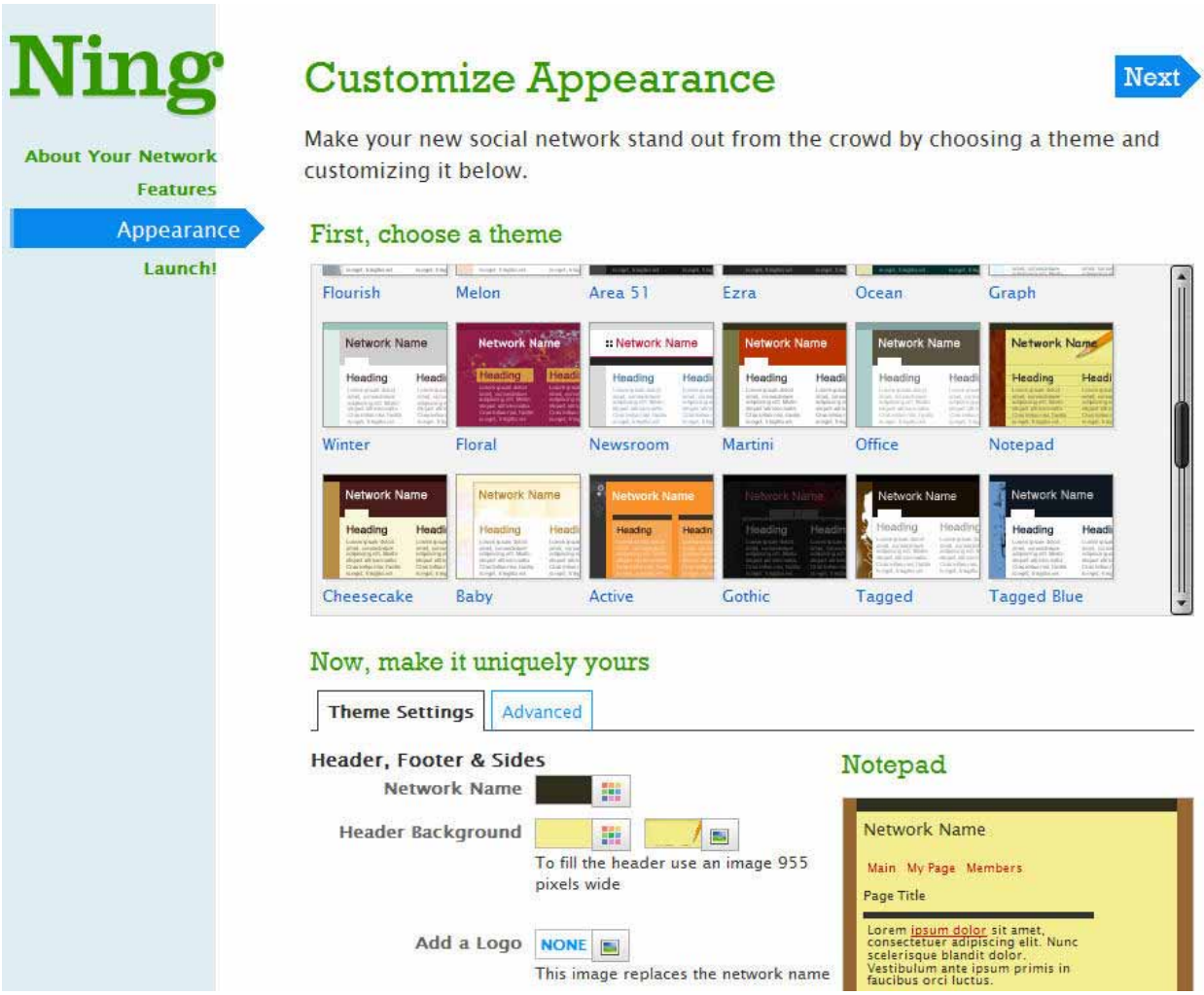
Now the fun begins! Drag-and-drop the features you want to use for your class from the left-hand panel into the pane on the right. Each feature is discussed in greater detail below, but this main screen shows you most of the elements you can add to your network. You do not need to add all of the elements at once. Ning sites allow you to modify them over time based on the needs of both you and your class.



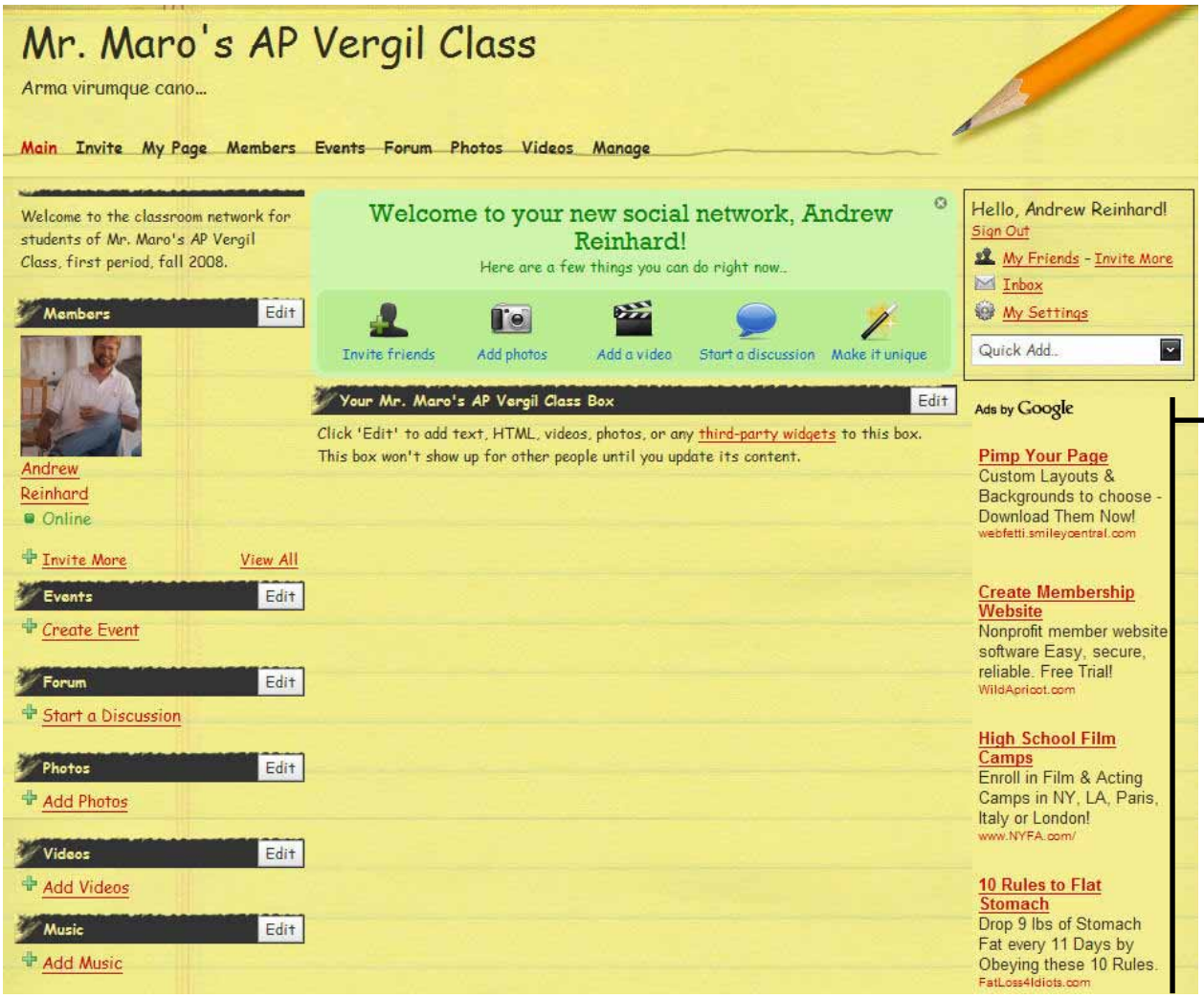
Briefly, here is what you can add to your site at this stage:

- **Description**: This is the brief description about this classroom network that you entered at the very beginning of this process.
- **Members**: See a list of all members, plus thumbnail-sized representations of them, uploaded by both you and your students.
- **Events**: Browse a list of upcoming events, be those tests, quizzes, class trips, and more.
- **Forum**: The discussion forum allows both you and your students to dialogue on a specific point, whether it's about the death of Dido or about the Latin grammar, vocabulary, and syntax Vergil used to describe it.
- **Photos**: Upload and view digital images pertinent to your class.
- **Videos**: Upload and view digital video. Many students opt to produce movies for their end-of-year projects. They can upload those videos here.
- **Music**: Upload and listen to MP3 audio. Record yourself reading Latin and post the files here; have your students do the same.
- **Text Box**: Free-text, typically used for breaking news.
- **Activity**: Automatically added by Ning, you can monitor who is doing what on the classroom site.

Once you have selected the features that you would like to have on your network, choose your theme (i.e. collection of design elements collected under a label like "Winter" or "Martini") and color scheme and fonts (use your school colors for example, or accept the Ning defaults). In this example, the "Notepad" theme is used.

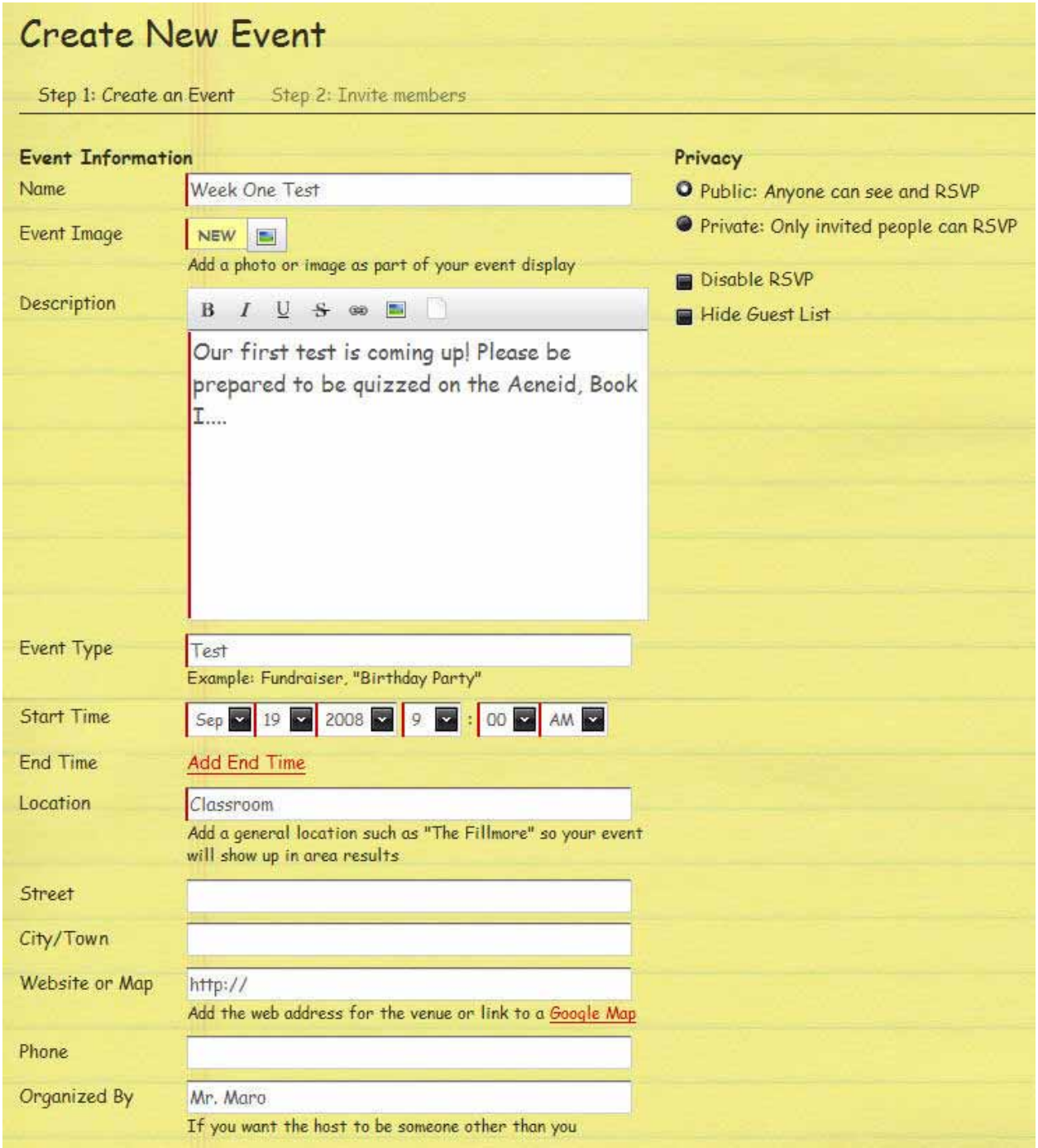


After selecting your theme, you can view the initial appearance of your classroom network. You will note the appearance of Google Ads on the right side of the screen. When your network is first created, these ads will make little sense; however, after the site has matured a week or two and you have added classroom content, the ads will change focus to display advertising topical to Classics and education. If you do not care for the advertising, Ning charges $20.00/month to remove the ads. It is the Google Ads revenue that keeps these social networking sites free on Ning. This is why Ning charges a monthly fee if you choose to opt out of the ads.

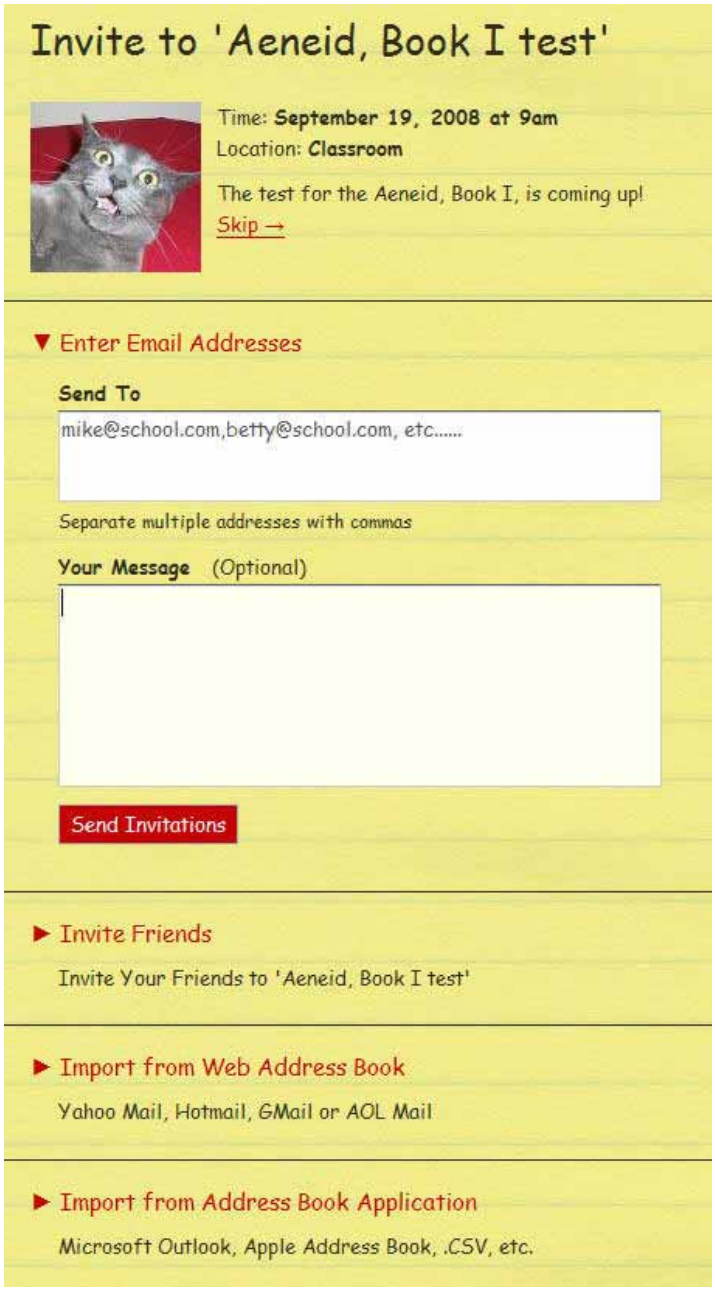


Add Events

It's now time to add some content. The "Add Event" feature lets you schedule things like quizzes and tests, or more fun stuff like Saturnalia parties or a birthday party for Rome. Students can choose to RSVP to these events in order to acknowledge them. The events are posted with date(s), start/end time(s), and location(s), along with an image topical to the event.

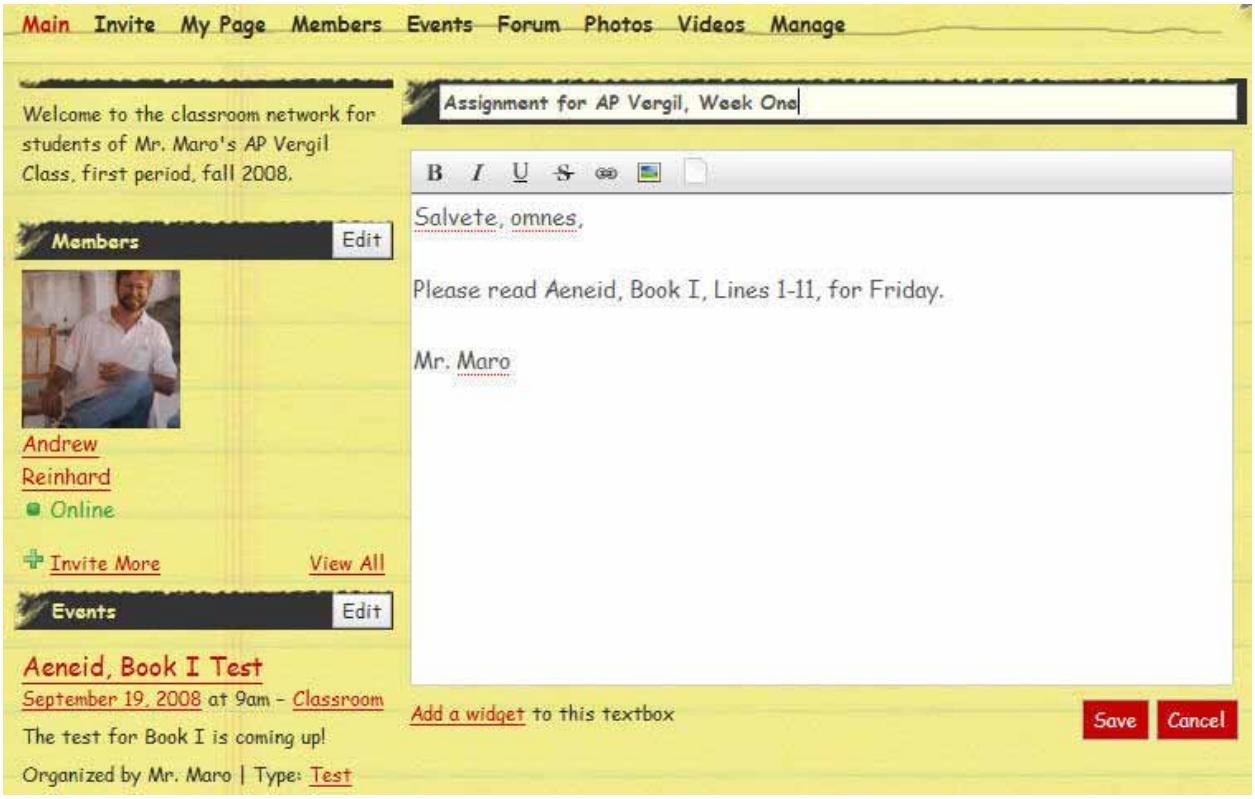


Send invitations to your students to remind them of upcoming events, too. When invitations are sent, invitees receive an email notification and do not have to visit the site to learn of the event. Student emails are held in the "Manage Members" area which is accessible by the site's administrator only. Students are responsible for entering their correct email addresses. When creating the invitation list online, the teacher may choose to copy/paste the email addresses directly from an Excel file produced by the site, or can enter these addresses by hand.



Add News and Notes

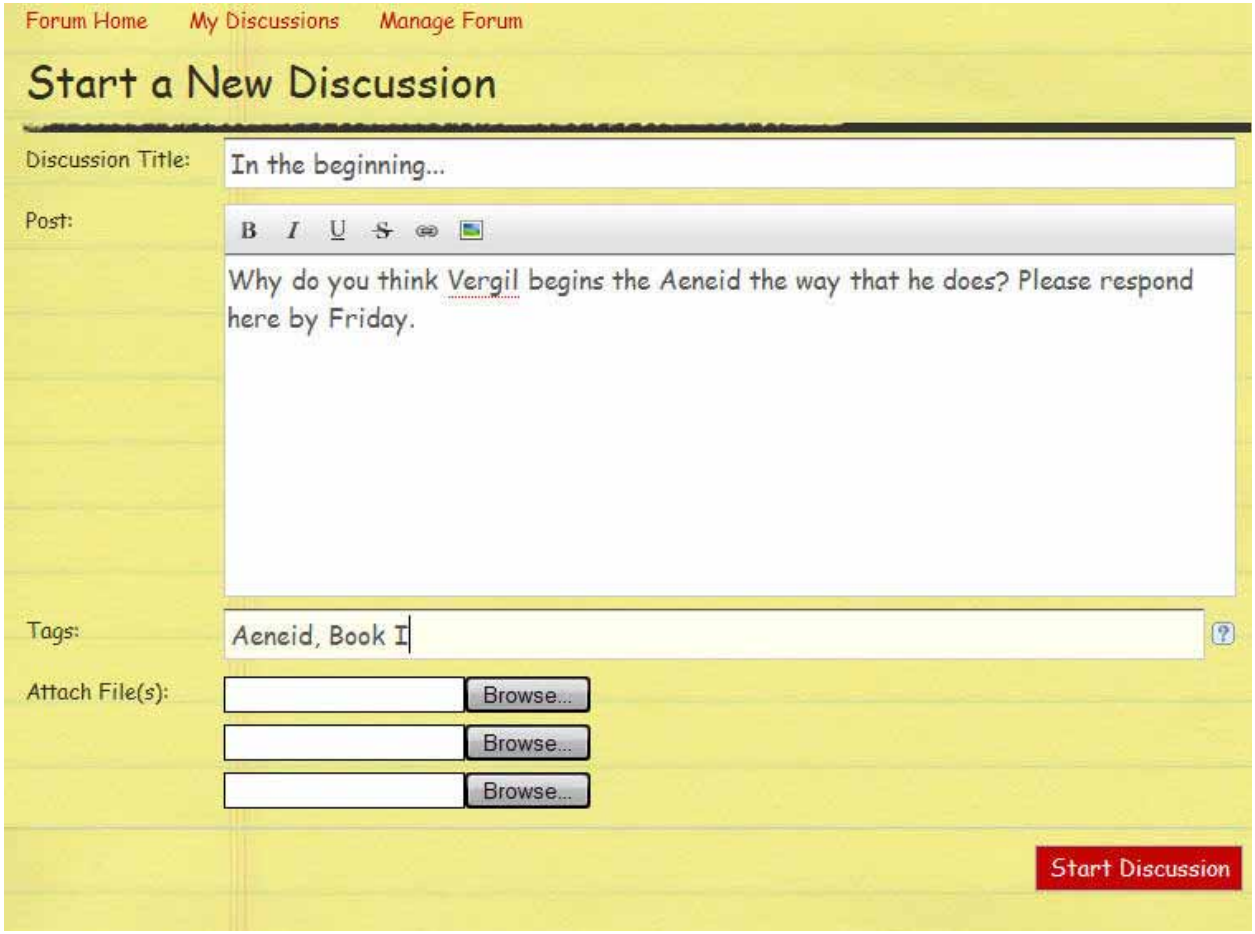
Many Ning networks contain news and notes at the top of the homepage. You can use the free-text box (top of your network) to add assignments and class news, too. Update the news daily or weekly to keep your students coming back to the site. When they are logged on, they will then have the opportunity to participate in online discussions on classroom topics, they can comment on blog posts by the instructor or by other students, and can upload and comment on multimedia pertinent to the class. These options are discussed in more detail below.



Add a Forum for After-Class Discussions

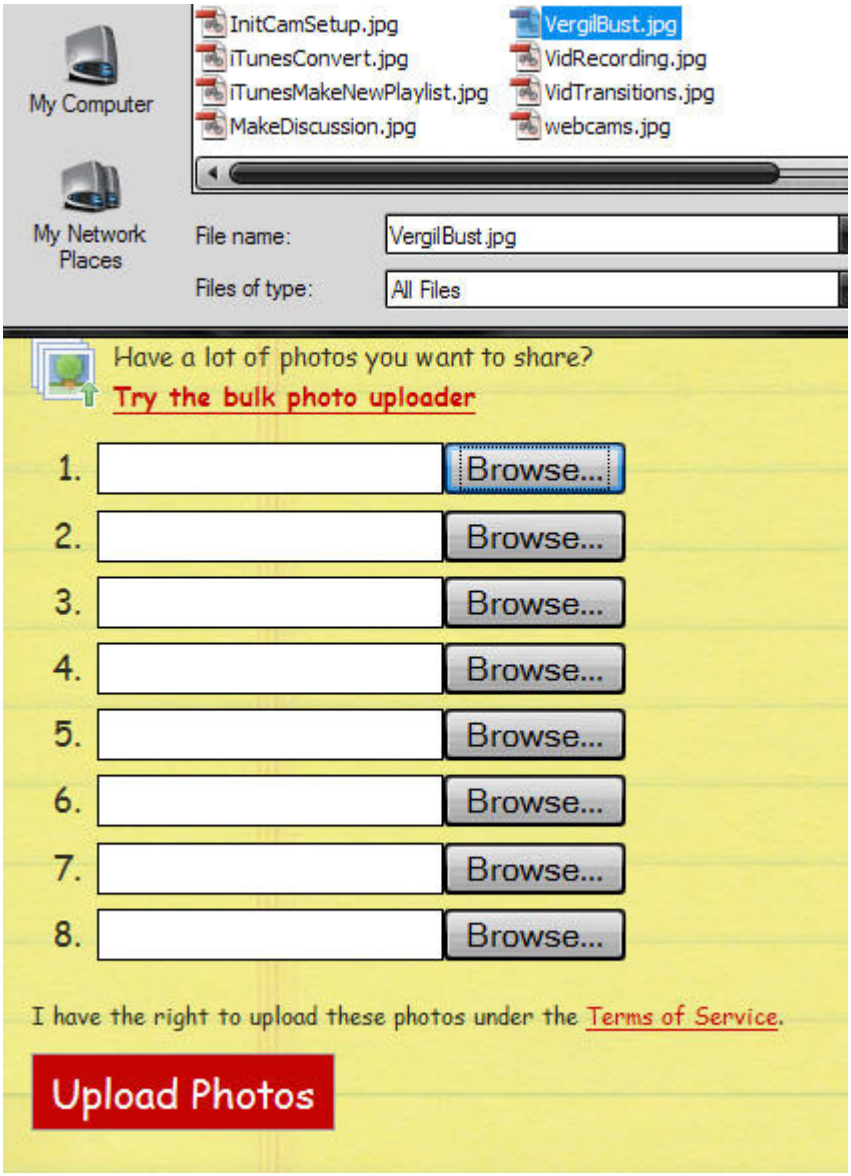
If your school has a mandatory writing component for every class, consider using Ning's Forum/Discussion feature to encourage your students to write about class-themed topics. Not only can the students earn writing credit through this online activity, but they can also engage each other in specific points of Latin grammar, translation, and the like, as well as themes with the content of the Latin read for class.

Each topic receives its own space on the Ning site to keep it separate from other topics. Each new topic may also be tagged by its author into a variety of categories such as "poetry" or "grammar" or "Book VI". Clicking on a tag like "Book VI" will call up all of the discussions relating to Book VI of the *Aeneid*.



Add Digital Images

Arguably the most fun you can have with social networks is with sharing multimedia (images, audio, video, and documents). Both you and your students can add digital images to the classroom network at will. Click on the "Add Photos" button to get to this window:



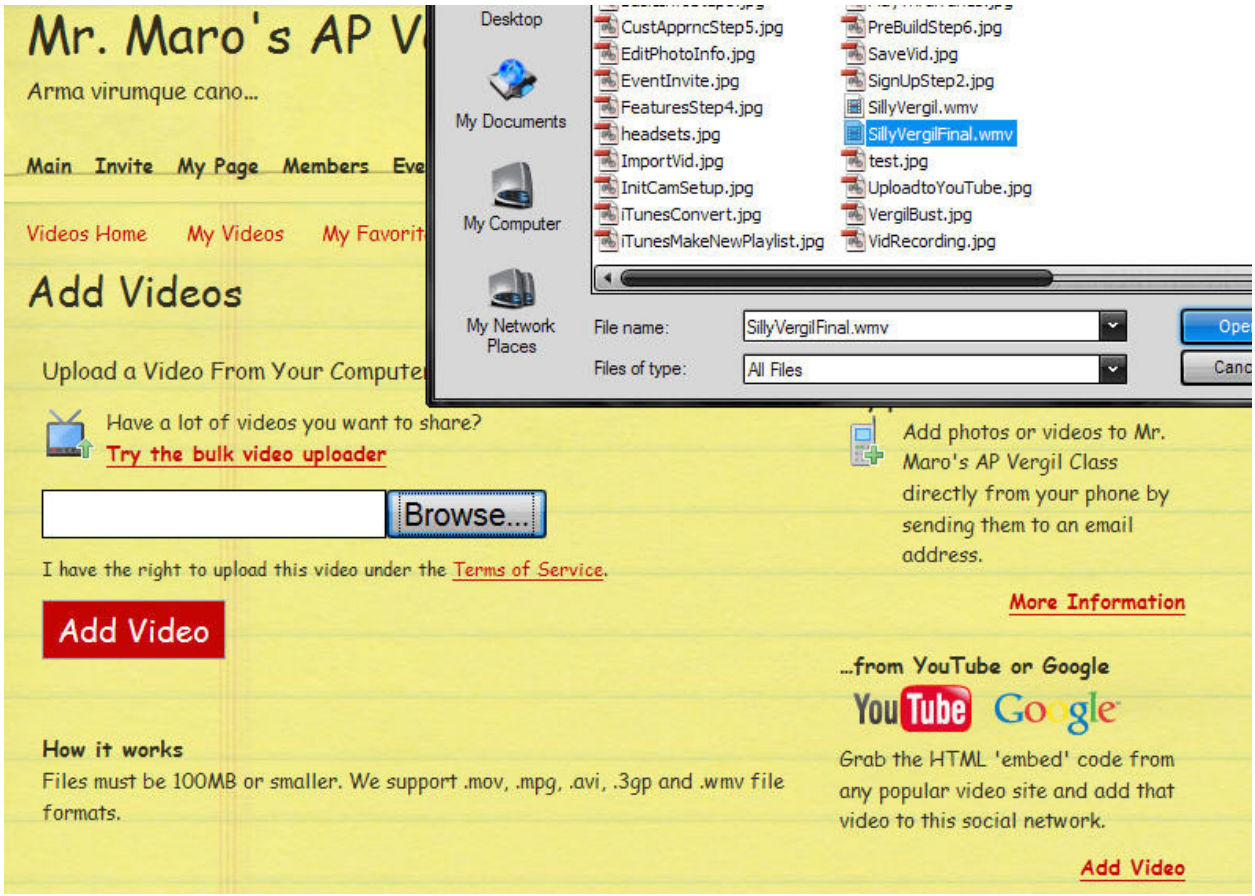
Browse for photos that you (or your students) have taken, or have downloaded online. These photos could be anything from scans of papyrus manuscripts to class trip photos to images of Vergil and more.

After selecting one or more photos to upload, add metadata (keywords and descriptive tags) about each digital image you post. Even though a lot of your images will be from the Internet and used in class under the "fair-use" license, don't forget to cite your sources:

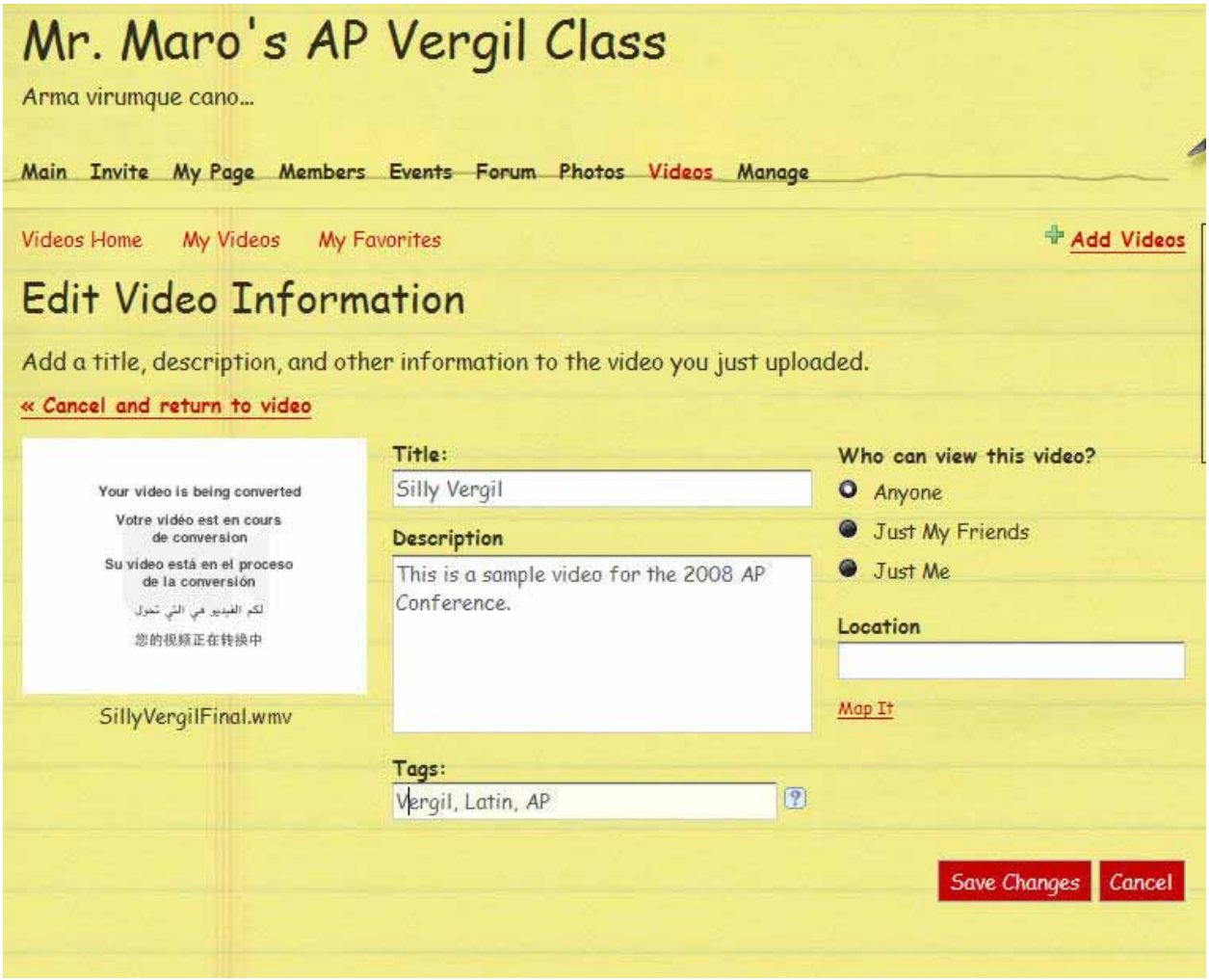
Add Digital Videos

You can add your own videos to your network, too. Many Latin classes have an end-of-year class project component, and increasing numbers of students are choosing to produce digital videos in Latin (whether with spoken Latin or with Latin subtitles).

Click the "Add Videos" button to get to the window below. Ning will convert even large videos (up to 100MB) to something any computer can manage, importing the videos into the site. The 100MB filesize allows you to upload high-quality videos that are brief (e.g. five minutes of full-screen, crystal-clear video vs. an hour of fuzzy video shown in a 2" x 3" box). Ning converts the videos for you to a proprietary online format, shrinking the filesize down without compromising quality.



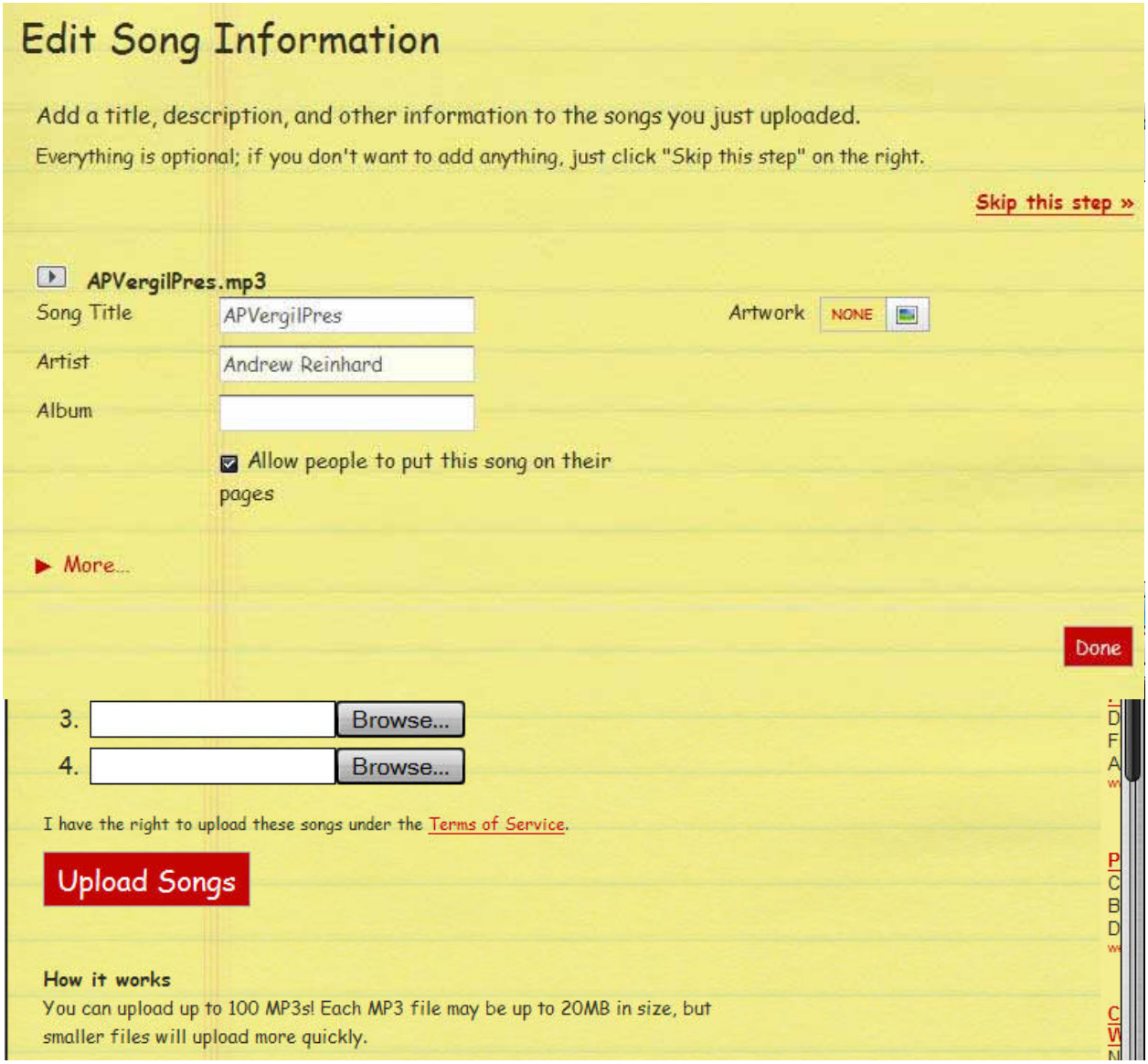
Add metadata about your video to let others know what it is about, including a title, brief description, and tags. For any media that you upload, you can choose to tag these files with keywords for quick retrieval during searches run through the site. For example, tagging a video as being from Book I of the *Aeneid* will allow that video to be returned during a search for all videos featuring content from Book I.



Add Digital Audio

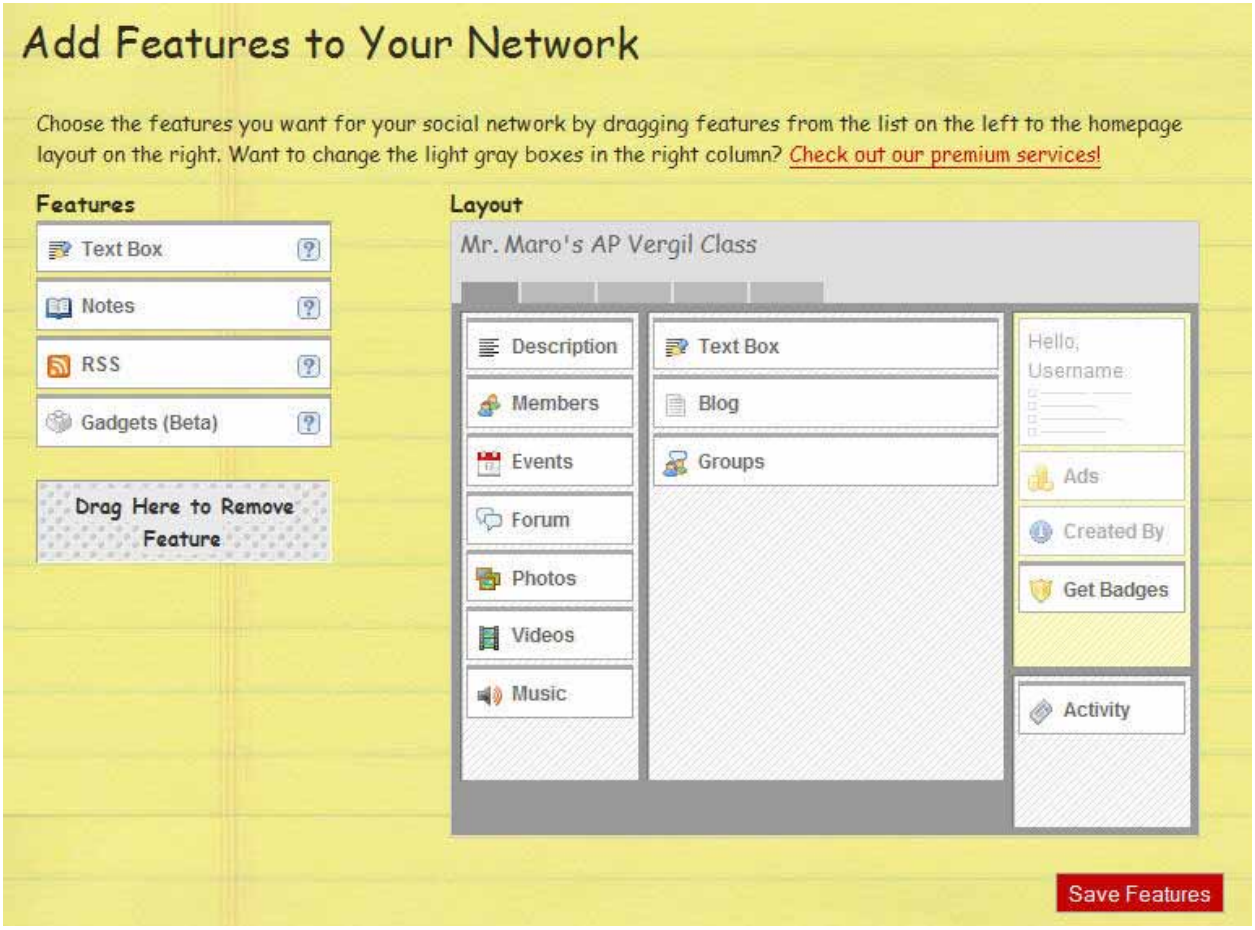
Even though Ning classes all audio as "music", your digital audio can be much more than that. Record your own oral interpretation of Latin, and encourage your students to practice reading their Latin aloud. Posting these audio files allows you as a teacher to listen to how your students are pronouncing the Latin, and also allows the other students to listen. You can leave comments underneath individual audio files with notes on pronunciation, or to give encouragement or praise. These comments can be seen by all members. To leave an individual comment for a student, use the site's internal email feature to send a personal message.

Click the "Add Music" button to get to the window above where you can add your MP3 files**.** Add metadata about the audio you are uploading (give credit where credit is due!).



Add other Features

When you first created your classroom social network, you had a few options of features to add (Forum, Audio, Video, Free Text, etc.). Click on the "Manage" heading on your homepage and then choose "Features" to select other fun options for your network (like Blogs and Groups).



Add Groups

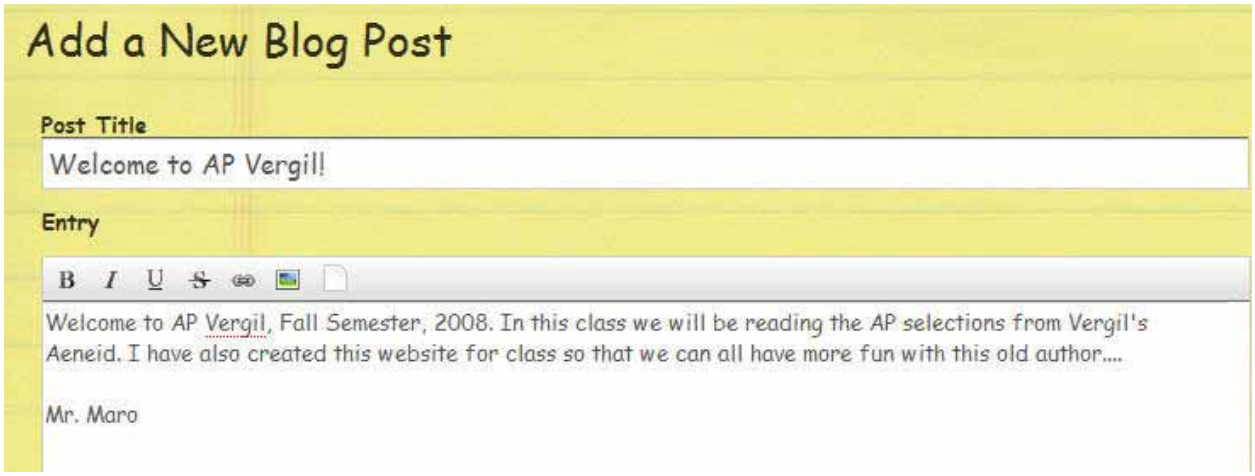
You can create an endless number of sub-groups for your Ning network. For your Latin classes, you might create Groups for your students to use when working together on class projects. Your students can use the Groups page to discuss projects and record the work that has been done on them so far. You might create groups for students collaborating on translation projects, or even groups for different levels of Latin that meet during the same class period in the same classroom (e.g. a Latin I group, a Latin IV group, and a Latin V group that all meet in Room 101 from 1:40 – 2:30).

For student project groups (like the one pictured below), the students actually create a group-related webpage within the main site that they can make their own. It is up to the group members to decide whether to allow anyone in, or to grant access to other students on an invitation-only basis. Students within a group can upload files to the group's page, as well as works in progress, and can document what they are doing for the benefit of other group members.

Add a Classroom Blog

Add the "Blog" feature from the Manage menu and create your own classroom blog to supplement the other activities on the Latin class network. Granted, you might opt to create a Latin class blog to cover day-to-day discussions of the literature being read in class. An advantage of a Ning-created Latin classroom network is the fact that the blog can be included among all of the other content in the site as another place to write and discuss grammar and content from the assigned readings (or even extra readings).

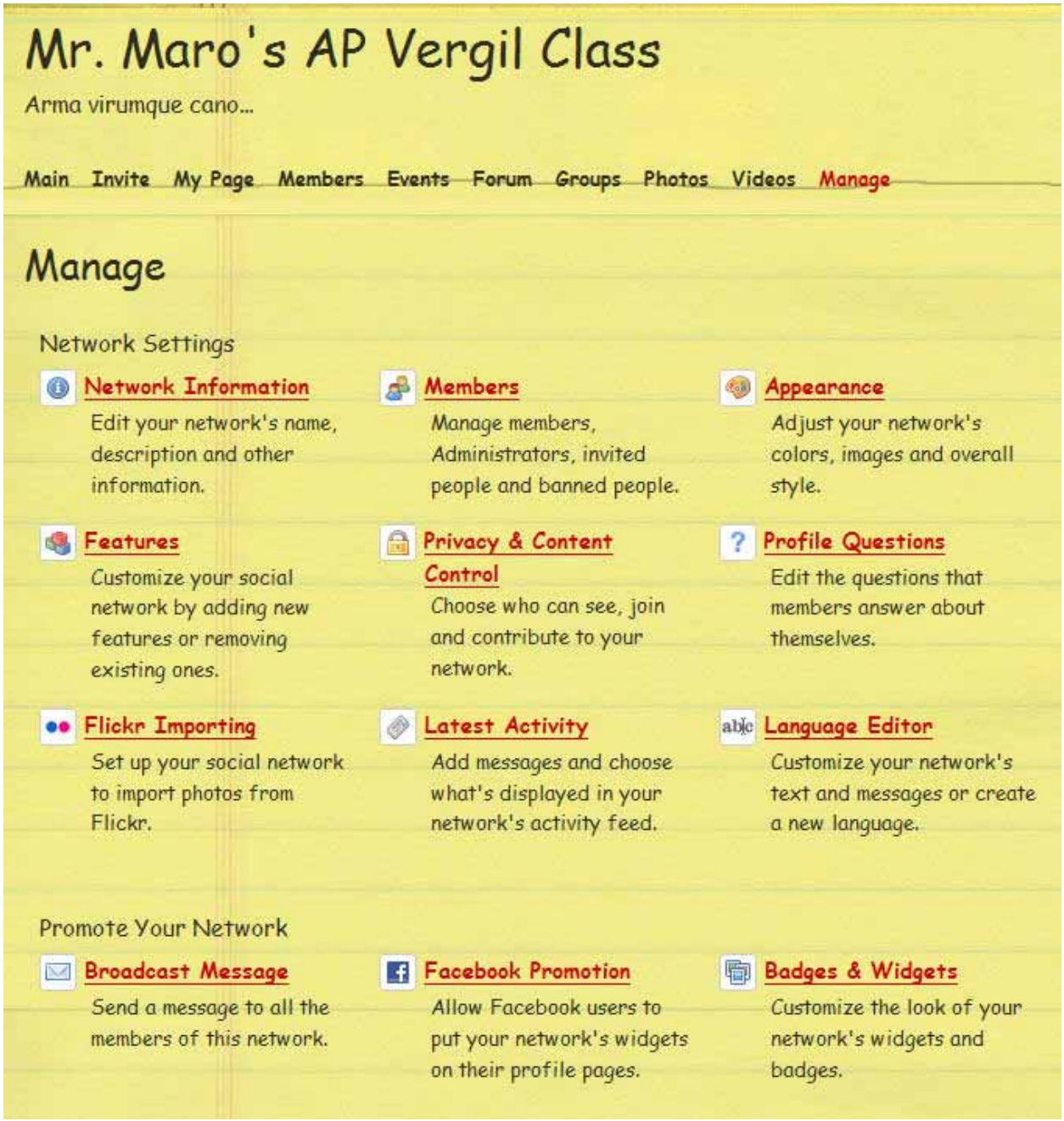
For classroom use, instructors might opt to keep the topics listed above as fodder for the forums, instead leaving the blogging to the students. When a student joins a Ning social network, s/he receives his/her own home page which includes space for a personal blog. It is here that students can write about their classroom experiences, make notes about an author they are reading or passage they are translating, or anything else related to the class. A teacher might be inspired to cast students as different characters from the *Aeneid* and have them blog in the voice of that character each week.[1]



[1] It would be easy to adapt Laurie Churchill's suggestions for keeping a weekly Latin language journal to the blog or forum (95-97).

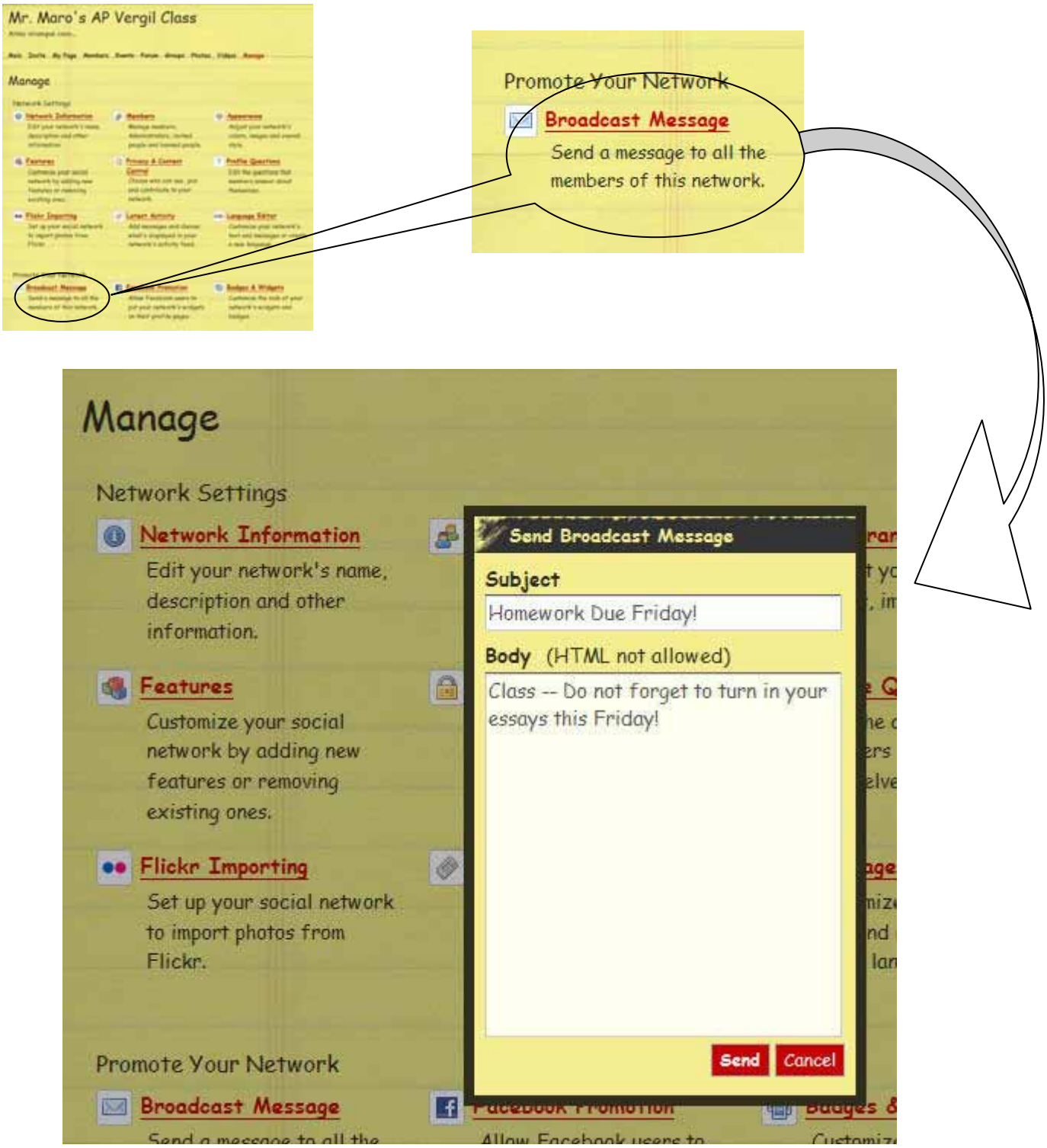
Ning's Manage Menu

As the classroom network's creator and administrator, you have several options to control security, access, and content. Your network's Manage menu, available to only you at the top of any page on the site, allows you to fully customize your network. These features are briefly described in the picture below.



Broadcast Messages

Do you need to make a class-wide announcement after-hours? Use the Manage menu's "Broadcast Message" feature to reach all of your students at once at any time. When the message has been successfully sent, Ning will give you a confirmation. Broadcast messages get sent as emails to the network's membership and do not require a student to be logged in in order to get the message.



Widgets

Tiny software programs called "widgets" for PC users and "gadgets" for Mac users allow one to post a calendar or a clock or a "phrase of the day" among other things. If you build a widget and post it on your classroom Ning site, you as the creator of that widget (and administrator of your site) can allow Facebook users to upload and share these small software applications. Permission from the site administrator is required as s/he is, in effect, a gatekeeper to the site's content, especially if it is private. If you so choose, you can upload your own widgets to your own Facebook profile and share them in that way rather than linking your site publicly to Facebook.

Making Your Latin Classroom Social Network(s) Successful

Most websites (and specifically blogs and other Web 2.0 creatures) die because of the lack of fresh content. In order for your classroom site to become truly useful, it is up to you as the instructor to both prime the pump with some content prior to the first day of class, and then make the site a clear, strong component of what is expected from your students as part of their daily routine: check the site, contribute to discussions, create or comment on content. With some encouragement, students will find this to be fun as they use a social networking tool to facilitate their Latin learning.

Conclusion

Your students are already on social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace; and many teachers have already created profiles as well to connect with friends and colleagues. Harnessing the obvious communicative power of sites like these is extraordinarily quick and easy via the network-creation tool, Ning. About a month before school starts, think about which classes would benefit the most from a dedicated classroom website, think about what you would like to do with a site like this, and don't forget to run the idea by your school administrator and IT department. Some schools do forbid access to social networking sites as a rule, but exceptions might be made for private, classroom-based sites on a case-by-case basis. It doesn't hurt to ask, and if enough interest is shown by faculty from many subjects, it may be easier to get the administration to effect a policy change.

The social networks you create empower your students to use the technological tools that they are familiar with in order to learn old languages in new ways. Teachers who opt to use Web 2.0 tools as part of the class experience do require their students to post content to the site. If teachers place homework assignments and news online, students will be obligated to visit the site anyway. As many courses have writing requirements set by the state, district, or school, you can use online discussions and blogging to fulfill that requirement. And once students learn that they can upload videos and fun pictures that they find, and can actively participate in discussions, they may forget that site participation is required and will instead spend time there on their own because it is fun and allows them to express themselves.

The Web 2.0/social networking sites themselves do not replace classroom lecture and the reading and study required for mastering Latin, but they do lend themselves to having fun with the subject while at the same time giving the students a place to review and to write. One of the questions I am frequently asked by teachers is, "why use this instead of [my course management system]?" For teachers, continue to manage your grades and the like through software packages

like Moodle or Blackboard. But if you give students a choice of using Blackboard or a social networking site for their classes, the course management software will lose.

With Web 2.0, we are realizing the teacher-student/student-teacher paradigm as described by Paolo Freire in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. By encouraging dialogue with your students on the works of Latin authors, you improve class participation and introduce other, Classically-grounded disciplines like rhetoric and philosophy into the mix, turning your Latin students into contemporary thinkers, and more eloquent writers and speakers.

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