

Why Schools Should Break the Web 2.0 Barrier

New paths to learning await schools that embrace the transformative power of technology.

BY WILL RICHARDSON

WHETHER IT'S THE LATEST NEWSPAPER TO GO OUT OF BUSINESS, THE NEW ORDER OF RUNNING POLITICAL campaigns online, or the increasing demands on companies by consumers who can organize together to create a unified voice, the verdict is in: Social-networking tools on the Web are changing the world. Everywhere you look, the effects of people being able to connect, create, and collaborate with one another—thanks to the explosion of Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, wikis, and large-scale networking sites like Facebook and MySpace—are challenging the way we think about much of how we work and live in this new world.

And if you're in education and you're not feeling challenged by how these technologies affect teaching and learning, you're not paying attention. Right now, our students are using these tools to connect with other people, young and old, outside of their physical spaces, to learn in ways that were not imaginable just 10 years ago. And this tectonic shift of connections has huge significance for the way we think about our roles as educators, our classrooms, and, most important, our own personal learning.

Yet despite the growing consensus from the MacArthur Foundation, the National School Boards Association, and many others that social-Web tools have important implications for the learning lives of our students, many schools and districts still refuse to consider their introduction to the classroom. In other words, while the world changes around us, we continue to ignore the realities of what author Dov Seidman terms the “hyperconnected and hypertransparent” future that our kids are going to be living in. Unfortunately, the vast majority of parents also have little or no contexts for how these tools change learning. And so, right now, millions of our children are using these social-Web technologies without any adults—either at school or home—teaching them how to leverage the potentials or how to use them safely, ethically, and responsibly.

That reality is unacceptable.

Bringing Web 2.0 into Schools

As the 2009 Horizon Report asserts, “Increasingly, those who use technology in ways that expand their global connections

are more likely to advance, while those who do not will find themselves on the sidelines.” And as the National Council of Teachers of English suggested late last year, important literacies today include “building relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally,” and “designing and sharing information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes.” It's becoming more and more obvious that the longer we wait to embrace these shifts, the less prepared our children will be.

On a practical level, there are compelling reasons to get our brains and our practice around Web 2.0 sooner rather than later.

1. Information in flux. The way we create and consume information today looks little like it did just a decade ago. Consider that not only is writing a social event online with wikis and blogs, but reading is now done collaboratively as well. Social-bookmarking tools such as Delicious and Diigo allow us to share and even annotate the best resources we find and to engage in critical conversations with others drawn to the same resources. With so much information out there, we need to help one another find and organize the most relevant, trustworthy stuff. To be truly information literate, we must teach our kids to be savvy editors, collaborators, and co-creators. We also must help them become facile with writing in hypertext, linking and connecting ideas and people. Furthermore, they must learn to read with a different attention in these much less linear environments. None of this can happen as effectively on paper; nor can a fluency in these global networks be taught locally.

2. Reputation management. Our students are going to be Googled or searched for online, over and over and over in their lives, by college admissions officers, future employers, future mates, and others. What appears in the results may have huge implications for their success. And those who are doing the Googling will not be doing it to find embarrassing pictures or stories as much as to find what work that student has done. In that sense, an empty search result may be more damaging than an adolescent indiscretion. Contribution may count as much if not more than credentials, and if we have not taught our kids to create, publish, share, and manage their presence online, we've left them ill equipped. And even more important, if we don't teach our kids how to create and manage their own "lifestreams" online, someone else may create those footprints for them. The ethics and safety issues that are involved in these processes are not easily discerned without guidance, modeling, and mentoring.

3. We learn anytime, anywhere. Right now, I can use my phone to post to my blog, add photos to my Flickr account, create a podcast, and send live streaming video of any event to the Web for others to watch. In our students' futures, they will have even more versatile devices in hand that allow them to create, publish, and connect anywhere they have access to the Web, which, at some point, will be everywhere. In other words, mobile phones and other wireless devices can be powerful tools in taking advantage of all that Web 2.0 affords. Yet the vast majority of schools right now tell students to leave these devices at the door (or at home). Rather than teaching students how to use them appropriately and ethically, we refuse to consider their potential for learning and creativity. Imagine instead the effect of unleashing the full benefits of Web 2.0 for students and teachers by empowering them to use every tool at their disposal in pursuit of their education.

4. Learning is built on networks and passions. Web 2.0 tools create what organizational researcher John Seely Brown calls a "passion-based" learning environment, one in which we can connect with others to share our love for a particular topic. Our students already know this. Take FanFiction.net, for example, a site at which thousands and thousands of young people congregate to create and share new chapters for the books they love or sequels to their favorite movies. Tools like this afford us the ability to highly individualize instruction in the context of our students' passions. But even more, there are complex digital-literacy skills associated with creating and navigating in these communities and networks. Students must be able to evaluate these interactions, assess the motives and the reputations (both traditional and non-traditional) of the people with whom they connect, and understand how to manage these connections safely and ethically.

5. Creating self-directed, lifelong learners. By and large, when our current students get out into their adult lives, most will not be coming back to a classroom. They will create their own learning experiences based on their specific needs. That means they will build their own classroom communities online; select, organize, and write their own curriculum; and find their own best teachers, mentors, and peers with whom to

Learning to Teach About Web 2.0 Tools

If you really want to integrate social-networking tools into your personal learning practice, remember this: Web 2.0 is not your parents' PowerPoint. While learning how to use tools such as blogs, wikis, and podcasts can happen in the traditional two- or four-hour sit-and-git workshop, understanding how to use the tools to create personal learning networks that are passion-based and global does not happen overnight. Understanding how that shift impacts pedagogy is even more nuanced. Web 2.0 is less about publishing than it is about connecting around what we publish, and that requires time, practice, and an appreciation for the responsibilities and skills required of us.

According to a report earlier this year by the National Staff Development Council, teacher education needs to be "sustained, focused on important content, and embedded in the work of collaborative professional learning teams." And just as immersion is the best way to learn a foreign language, immersion into social networks with trusted guides and mentors is an effective way not only to provide context but to actually shift teacher practice.

Long-term, job-embedded opportunities for professional development around networked learning is not about tools first; it's about deeply understanding this new landscape in a global context. Clay Shirky's book *Here Comes Everybody* is not about education per se, but it's a great primer for the shape and magnitude of the shifts we are experiencing. More and more, recent articles in professional journals have been covering these topics in depth as well. Once that context is in place, the tools themselves take on a different meaning, not just as ways to share ideas and artifacts with the world, but ways to connect and start conversations for learning. And finally, after some time is spent exploring the potentials for ourselves, then we can turn to the pedagogical implications of classroom instruction with Web 2.0 technologies.

Right now, educators of all stripes are using blogs to share their experiences. Reading some of those reflections might be a good entry point to these tools. A good starting point is at [SupportBlogging!](#), which includes a list of edubloggers by discipline and position. Lately, many educators have been drawn to Twitter as a way to begin to interact with others. You might check out [twitter4teachers](#) or look at the education list at [wefollow.com](#). Still others create and/or listen to podcasts or collaborate on wikis. There are tens of thousands of educators who have embraced the social web as a big part of their professional development. Look at what they're doing, and learn.

—W.R.

learn. Each of these steps requires a skill set of literacy tools, certainly, but also a sophistication with cobbling together the technologies in ways that maximize the learning. Thoughtful uses of social-media tools in the classroom today will help prepare our students to make effective use of these new learning potentials throughout their adult lives.

Steps Schools Need To Take

Taken together, the picture of our students' current and future learning lives outside of school looks vastly different from most paper-based, assessment-driven, curriculum-focused classrooms they currently inhabit. And that is where the biggest challenge lies right now: not in the time, legal, technology, or expectation constraints that we often suggest as our reasons for avoiding this social-networking revolution, but in the different vision required to see this world in a new light, one that aligns more closely with the reality our students are stepping into. None of this is a unit. We cannot teach this new information and these reputation and learning skills in a six-week add-on to the

Bridging the School-Home Gap

by Rebecca Randall

As technology becomes a more pervasive part of students' lives, thousands of schools are working hard to integrate digital media and technology into the curriculum. But parents are often left out in the cold, desperately seeking guidance on what these new technologies mean for their children. Quite simply, it is very challenging for parents to keep up with the new digital media world. Yet they have a profound role to play in educating young people to ensure they use new technology responsibly.

Schools can play an instrumental role in ensuring parents get the information they need to help their kids. Researchers from the University at Buffalo and University of Maryland found that preteens and teens who were educated on the importance of Internet privacy were more likely to take precautions online, such as protecting their personal information, than those who weren't. And among teachers, peers, and parents, the education provided by parents had the most impact on kids' online behavior.

The Maine Department of Education, which implemented the first statewide 1:1 laptop program in the country, understands the importance of educating parents about Internet safety. In partnership with Common Sense Media, a national nonprofit organization, it is implementing a pilot program that goes beyond just Internet safety. The program provides parents with the information they need to help their kids make safe and smart decisions about how they use the Internet, mobile phones, social-networking sites, television, and other digital media.

"This partnership offers us the best opportunity to engage parents even more deeply in our technology programs and to provide them with important information about the ever-changing digital media issues that kids experience every day," says Maine Education Commissioner Susan A. Gendron. As digital media continues to evolve at a rapid pace and parents get left in the dust, it's critical that schools across the country follow Maine's lead.

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current middle school curriculum, something many schools try to do and fail. This demands a fundamental change in the ways we do our learning business in schools.

As professionals, these shifts require us to be learners first and teachers second. If we are to fully appreciate the transformative connections that these technologies afford for our students, we must understand them for ourselves. And in that context, while there may remain difficult challenges to our implementation of Web 2.0 on a school level, the question becomes this: What is preventing us from doing it for ourselves? What is preventing us from exploring these shifts and potentials in our own learning lives so that we can better model and teach our students to navigate these spaces effectively, ethically, and safely?

Most importantly, we must stop making this a conversation about technology. This is learning as it exists one decade into the 21st century. The longer we wait to accept that, the less prepared our students will be. ●●●

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