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Don't Be Afraid to Explore Web 2.0

BY JOHN THOMPSON

WEB 2.0 is a hot topic. The term “Web 2.0” refers to the next generation of Internet applications that allow (even encourage) the average Internet user to collaborate and share information online. It signals a major change in Internet use, since in the computer world “2.0” indicates a major upgrade to an original program.

Web 2.0 sites allow anyone to contribute content and to participate with other users in editing and even combining or remixing existing content with other material to repurpose it for additional uses. Thus content on the Internet is no longer static; it is changing and dynamic. A distinguishing Web 2.0 feature is the increasing significance of the individual user, as anybody (even a fifth-grader) can create and upload text, as well as audio and video, to the Internet. Another characteristic is the reliance on user participation, often referred to as the “wisdom of the crowd” and the “architecture of participation.” Web 2.0 has an inherent trust in people and what they can contribute when working together toward a common goal for the greater good.

If Web 1.0 (even though we did not know it was “1.0” at the time) was a read-only medium, today’s Web 2.0 is read/write. The Internet’s first era of mass use required users with programming skills to contribute (upload) material to the Internet. Early Internet users found that material in a manner similar to going to the library to find and take home a book. In contrast, Web 2.0 users still go to the library (i.e., the Internet), but instead of figuratively just taking home a book to read, they now enjoy other possible uses, including contributing comments, changing the contents, and having others simultaneously read the material in real time.

So perhaps you are thinking that all of this is very interesting, but you’re wondering, What effect can Web

2.0 have on me and how I do my job? Maybe your favorite FM radio station is WII-FM (What’s In It For Me?). Read what educators are saying. Kim Estes, a secondary instructional technology specialist in the Burseson (Texas) Independent School District, says Web 2.0 is “shifting the focus from individualized work to collaborative efforts, from individual learning to collective knowledge, from passive reception to active creation.” Kathy Schrock, a technology administrator in the Nauset Public Schools in Orleans, Massachusetts, and keeper of the Kathy Schrock’s Guide for Educators website, relates that the “ability to add to the body of knowledge about a topic, offer additional information, or state an opinion via public commenting on a blog or social networking site allows students to understand the importance of producing information for an authentic audience.”

Several thousand Web 2.0 applications have become available in the last few years. These applications are generally free to individuals. One suite of online applications that promotes creating, sharing, and collaborating is Zoho (<http://zoho.com>), which offers a word processor, spreadsheet, presentation tool, and note taker, among other services. Another increasingly popular and diverse online productivity and collaboration application is Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>), which requires a free Google account. Google is increasingly becoming more than just a search engine. Google Docs is a suite of applications that allow you to import existing documents or create new documents, spreadsheets, and presentations. As with other Web 2.0 applications, it is Web-based so you can create, edit, and store your material online. Using online applications instead of programs installed on your desktop or laptop computer is a hallmark of Web 2.0 applications, so much so that it has acquired its own name: “cloud computing.” The all-encompassing Internet is the “cloud.”

However, Google recently announced that it will begin permitting word processor users to store files on their personal computers in addition to using Google’s online storage, thereby giving you access to your work when the Internet is not available, such as when you are on a plane. In this way, you will be able to edit your work on your computer and then synchronize it with what is stored online when you have Internet access again. Similar functions with spreadsheets and presentation software will be phased in over time. More information can be found at the Google Docs Blog (<http://googledocs.blogspot.com>) or at the Google Docs Community Channel (<http://youtube.com/googledocscommunity>). Of course, you can also combine Google
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applications such as Picasa (store/edit/share photos), Blogger (create and share blogs), Calendar (coordinate meetings and events with shareable calendars), and Earth (blend satellite images, maps, and even 3D structures to display global geographic information). Google is fast becoming a one-stop shopping center for Web 2.0 applications.

Social bookmarking sites are another Web 2.0 category. Instead of saving Internet bookmarks to your computer's hard drive, save the addresses at a website. Then they are available to you from any computer with Internet access, anywhere in the world. Social bookmarking gives you greater capabilities than the traditional method of bookmarking. You decide who has access to your links — they can be confidential and only for you, limited to certain individuals (e.g., students) who have password access, or available to the general public. Most social bookmarking sites, such as del.icio.us (<http://del.icio.us>) encourage users to assign "tags" (think keywords) to their saved sites. The result is called a tag cloud, which is a group of tags of different sizes to indicate relative popularity. Michelle Bourgeois of Pensacola Catholic High School in Pensacola, Florida, relates that her science department is "beginning to share Web resources by creating a network of del.icio.us users so that they can easily tag and collect curriculum-related bookmarks in a common place." Other popular social bookmarking sites include www.blinklist.com and www.stumbleupon.com.

In response to the numbers of educators and students using PowerPoint, SlideShare (www.slideshare.net) features storage of presentations online. This enables students to show their work to a larger audience, for example. Or administrators can upload presentations from professional development sessions so participants have access afterward. However, SlideShare is not just a place to upload a presentation. Your slide-shows can be public or private. You can synchronize audio with your slides, and you can join a community of SlideShare groups who share your interests. The opportunity to participate in a community of users is a major attribute of Web 2.0 applications.

There are many more types of Web 2.0 applications. For example, if you want to create your own blog, you can use free host sites such as Blogger (www.blogger.com), or teachers can set up a classroom blog and screen entries before they are posted at Class Blogmeister (<http://classblogmeister.com>). Creating a podcast (an audio or video recording posted to the Inter-

net for downloading to an iPod or other digital device) is simple. Use your telephone to record directly to GabCast (www.gabcast.com) or Gcast (www.gcast.com). Students can then listen to your audio commentary about their papers. Set up an RSS (really simple syndication) feed using Bloglines (www.bloglines.com) to get timely information from various blogs, news sources, and podcasts. The information comes in the form of "feeds" to a single site, which means you don't have to canvass each individual site for things that you're interested in. And there are many other types of Web 2.0 applications so you can brainstorm (<http://bubbl.us>), diagram (www.gliffy.com), personalize a homepage (www.pageflakes.com), interact in live video broadcasting (www.ustream.tv), and share media (<http://flickr.com>).

Use del.icio.us to store applicable sites for colleagues or to preselect sites for student projects. Use Flickr to store student-taken photos and to locate photos for projects. Use Google Docs to create and edit presentations online. Transfer them to SlideShare and add accompanying audio. Wikis (such as Wetpaint, www.wetpaint.com) allow users to collectively create, add to, and edit content and make real-time access to committee documents available 24/7. Turn to bubbl.us for online brainstorming sessions with committee colleagues.

Educators have suggestions on how to begin using Web 2.0. David Widener, who is IT and curriculum director for the Woodward Academy outside Atlanta, advises that "anyone wishing to get started with Web 2.0 needs to take the approach of our students. Go online and click unbridled. You have to explore and experiment." Elaine Talbert, who manages the Web Filter Unit for the New South Wales Department of Education and Training in Australia, uses Web 2.0 tools for teacher professional learning and says to "take some time to explore all the tools and widgets. Apply fun and function for use in teaching as the criteria."

Web 2.0 offers educators new teaching and learning tools. Web 2.0 can change the way teachers interact with students and how students interact among themselves. When you start exploring the information and sites presented here, try avoiding getting overwhelmed by the ever-growing number of Web 2.0 applications. In addition to the sites mentioned here, you should also visit sites that have lists of other sites, such as www.go2web20.net and www.classroom20.com. Start exploring. Get acquainted with what Web 2.0 has to offer. Take your time. Take baby steps — one small application at a time. Web 2.0 offers powerful applications with great potential, but you have to use them to experience their benefits. 

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