THE NEW FACE OF LEARNING

WHAT HAPPENS TO TIME-WORN CONCEPTS OF CLASSROOMS AND TEACHING WHEN WE CAN NOW GO ONLINE AND LEARN ANYTHING, ANYWHERE, ANYTIME?

BY WILL RICHARDSON    ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVID JULIAN
At some point last year, the Web welcomed its one billionth user. Demographers who study such things determined that this person was in all likelihood a twenty-four-year-old woman from Shanghai. As far as I know, no prizes were awarded. The striking thing to me about that milestone is not the enormity of the number, however. More interesting, perhaps, is that the one billionth person to jump onto the Web could just as easily been an eight-year-old kid from Sweden or the South Bronx (or, for that matter, an eighty-year-old from South Africa) who sat down at a computer, opened a browser, and for the first time started connecting to the sum of human knowledge we are collectively building online. Furthermore, that eight-year-old had just as much ability to start contributing what she might know about horses or her hometown or whatever her passions might be, becoming an author in her own right, teaching the rest of us what she knows.

It’s amazing in many ways that in just a few short years, we have gone from a Web that was primarily “read only” to one where creating content is almost as easy as consuming it. One where writing and publishing in the forms of blogs and wikis and podcasts and many other such tools is available to everyone. One where we can connect not just to content but to people and ideas and conversations as well.

Since that Read/Write Web, or Web 2.0, as some call it, is transforming the traditional structures of many of our most important institutions. How does business change when markets become lively conversations between the consumers who buy their products? What happens to politics when potentially every voter can give immediately direct feedback to elected representatives on important issues, or to journalism when anyone with a wireless camera phone can report on events both large and small? What happens to cultures when bloggers in Beirut and Haifa can connect while bombs fall around them?

And what happens to traditional concepts of classrooms and teaching when we can now learn anything, anywhere, anytime?

I find these questions particularly intriguing because my own learning and teaching have been transformed since I stumbled across a blog in spring 2001. I became a blogger that same day, and I’ve been writing and thinking and learning at Weblogg-ed.com ever since. That is where my passion for these technologies and their effects on teachers and classrooms is chronicled and archived.

Some 2,500 pieces of published writing later (with almost as many comments back from readers), I can say without hesitation that all my traditional educational experiences combined, everything from grade school to grad school, have not taught me as much about learning and being a learner as blogging has. My ability to easily consume other people’s ideas, share my own in return, and communicate with other educators around the world has led me to dozens of smart, passionate teachers from whom I learn every day. It’s also led me to technologies and techniques that leverage this newfound network in ways that look nothing like what’s happening in traditional classrooms.

In this new interactive Web world, I have become a nomadic learner; I graze on knowledge. I find what I need when I need it. There is no linear curriculum to my learning, no formal structure other than the tools I use to connect to the people and sources that point me to what I need to know and learn, the same tools I use to then give back what I have discovered. I have become, at long last, that lifelong learner my teachers always hoped I would become. Unfortunately, it’s about thirty years too late for them to see it.

The good news for all of us is that today, anyone can become a lifelong learner. (Yes, even you.) These technologies are user friendly in a way that technologies have not been in the past. You can be up and blogging in minutes, editing wikis in seconds, making podcasts in, well, less time than you’d think. It’s not difficult at all to be an active contributor in this society of authorship we are building.

As usual, many of our students already know this. Kids are flocking to the Web by the millions, enthusiastically sharing music, stories, poetry, video, and pictures (some of which we’d rather not see.) They are communicating online, IMing, gaming, participating, producing. It’s like using pen and paper and a printing press in digital space, and they are pushing it, stretching their imaginations, looking to us to do the
Many of our students are already building networks far beyond our classroom walls, forming communities around their passions and their talents.

And so they might never learn to podcast like the third and fourth graders creating the podcasts in Bob Sprankle’s class at Wells Elementary School, in Wells, Maine. They might therefore never publish a local museum tour, an interview with a local celebrity, or an oral history about their town that a billion people could listen to. Nor will they ever get the chance to collaborate in a blog with U.S. soldiers in Iraq, like April Chamberlain’s students at Paine Intermediate School, in Trussville, Alabama, and learn firsthand what it’s like to be a Screaming Eagle. Or share stories about the places they live at Wikiville.org.uk, where hundreds of kids from around the world have started writing and connecting. Or teach calculus to thousands and build potent learning networks in a billion primary sources out there—scientists, journalists, politicians, and the like—who may know more than we do about whatever it is we are teaching, and, for the first time, we can easily and flexibly bring them to our students to interact and learn. I was a journalism major in college, but when Pulitzer Prize–winning reporter Scott Higham, from the Washington Post, mentored one of my students by interacting with her on her blog, she learned more than I alone could have taught her. Even better, we can teach our students how to make these connections themselves, to find the sources and resources they need when they need them, instead of depending on us to provide them.

This is a world where literacy is changing, where readers need to be editors. Now that anyone can publish...
just about anything in a heartbeat, checking for facts and relevance often occurs after publication. If you don’t believe that, go to MartinLuther-King.org, which comes up in the top ten Google search results for King yet is published by a white-supremacist group and is intended solely to discredit his work through duplicity and falsehoods. (See “Online, on Alert,” page 16.) If our students don’t know how to find that out, if we ourselves don’t know how to do that, I would argue that we are illiterate. Yet our curricula include little if anything that goes beyond the basic reading, writing, and computational literacies.

This is indeed, a changed world. From the realities of war to the fears of avian flu and the global-warming crisis, these first few years of the twenty-first century have already tested us in innumerable ways, and the tests show no sign of abating in either intensity or frequency. But I wonder whether, twenty-five or fifty years from now, when four or five billion people are connecting online, the real story of these times won’t be the more global tests and transformations these technologies offered. How, as educators and learners, did we respond? Did we embrace the potentials of a connected, collaborative world and put our creative imaginations to work to reenvision our classrooms? Did we use these new tools to develop passionate, fearless, lifelong learners? Did we ourselves become those learners?

Or did we cling to old ideas, old models, and old habits and drift more fully into irrelevance in our students’ eyes?

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Most of us now live in a world where, with access, knowledge is abundant, yet we have yet to reconsider our traditional school model, which is based on the obsolete idea that knowledge is scarce.
In the El Paso (Texas) Independent School District, the high school algebra textbooks are dog eared and worn, thumbed by students year after year and aligned with state educational standards that have since been updated. Like all printed books, the algebra books are frozen in time, reflecting (hopefully) the state of the art of knowledge at the moment the publisher’s deadline hit. Therein, however, lies the problem. Classroom teaching shouldn’t be as static as the textbooks on which it’s based.

Superintendent Dr. Lorenzo Garcia has a better idea: He has set his sights on having El Paso’s teaching coaches create their own source materials for use across the school district. Someday, he hopes, they’ll even write their own textbooks. They’ll do it cheaply, collaboratively, and efficiently—through open source technology.

Open source content, or material freely contributed and given away, is best known to software engineers through operating systems such as Linux and to the nongeeky rest of us through the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. Open source, unfortunately, sometimes gets a bad rap as the unreliable product of a free-for-all by the unqualified yet opinionated masses.

TOSS THE TRADITIONAL TEXTBOOK

OPEN SOURCE EDUCATION RESOURCES CAN REPLACE STALE OLD VOLUMES.

BY GRACE RUBENSTEIN
Cooperative, a not-for-profit spinoff of Sun Microsystems, is gearing up a Web site similar to Connexions, only focused specifically on K–12 math, science, technology, reading/language arts, and foreign language instruction. Organizers aim to build a critical mass of curricula and a large community of active contributors by the beginning of the new year.

Open source content could bolster the education of not only students but also teachers, says Ronald Powell, administrator of the Desert/Mountain Special Education Local Plan Area, in San Bernardino County, California. He sees an open source library as the ideal environment for teachers to share best practices and lesson plans and to overcome the isolation that forces new teachers to learn solely by trial and error. “All of us are smarter than one of us,” he adds.

Powell knows the risks of opening content up to unregulated editing. “Education is fully populated with wild and crazy ideas, many of which don’t work,” he says. The key is to attract enough teachers to the site that the reasoned many can police the activities of the errant few.

Why would someone spend time writing materials just to let anyone use them free? It’s not about the money, says devotees of open content; it’s about the personal credit, and the impact authors can have. On Connexions (which, unlike Wikipedia, identifies authors by name), the most popular contributor is Kitty Jones, a private music instructor in Champaign, Illinois. Her modules on teaching students to play and read music are viewed up to 600,000 times a month, frequently by educators in U.S. K–12 schools. Garcia says such open source publishing can honor the expertise of teachers who feel disenfranchised by standardized curriculum and exams.

Baraniuk envisions a day when his site will hold so much knowledge that each student can have a personalized textbook cobbled together from different modules to match his or her strengths and weaknesses, then ordered from a print-on-demand publisher for about $20 and delivered to school overnight. Compare that to a typical textbook price tag of $60 to $80.

For public schools, however, there’s a snag in realizing this vision; districts generally may buy primary textbooks only that their state has approved for adoption. (Most universities fall under no such restriction, and Connexions already boasts the content for any college student to print up a complete electrical engineering textbook.) Sanford Forte, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur who used to work in textbook publishing, is campaigning to change this closed system through his not-for-profit organization, the California Open Source Textbook Project. (See “Crack the Books,” September/October 2004.)

No open source K–12 books that conform to required state curriculum frameworks have emerged so far, Forte says, because denizens of what he calls the “Wild West” open source environment don’t like the yoke of state standards. But a group of teachers working together in a protected space, where open source cowboys couldn’t trespass, could produce far more innovative material than Forte sees in conventional texts, and for far less money. All that’s needed, he adds, is a little initiative by state officials or private investors—and he figures an investor with enough patience could turn a “distribution-only,” open source, state-approved textbook enterprise into a $200 million business.

Many teachers are already using open source content to supplement primary texts. “We’re going to revolutionize the whole book industry,” says Garcia, who plans to start his staff writing and using Connexions modules this fall. Ultimately, he’ll seek state support for El Paso teachers to create their own full-fledged textbooks. He says, “Wouldn’t that be something?”

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