What's So Powerful About Web 2.0?

To help your teachers take advantage of Web 2.0 tools, it's important for you to set the example.

By Cathy Higgins

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Web 2.0 tools are causing a massive shift in power and practice across the educational community. If you don't see the change in your school yet, you will. If you haven't embraced it yet, you will. One quick read of the blog post "Web 2.0 Is the Future of Education" (Hargadon, 2008) just might convince you to pay attention. Hargadon explains how these new tools, which allow a two-way read/write process on the Web, are changing the nature and process of content creation. And this opening up of content control is inevitably leading education into new territory.

Let's start with students. Most already have an online presence through one or more social networking services, such as Facebook or MySpace. In fact, according to a 2007 survey conducted by Project Tomorrow, 40% of students in grades 6–8 and 67% of high school students maintain a personal Web site where they are the content creators (Project Tomorrow, 2008). They don't just read Web pages, they write them. No, I'm not saying that they're all writing HTML code from scratch. They're using Web 2.0 tools and adding their own content. Ask yourself this: How many principals and teachers do you know who do this? Of those who do, how many of them are creating content to support the curriculum at your school? If they're not doing this, why not?

Recent literature about the skills that students will need in the 21st century workplace emphasizes the value of creating, collaborating, and using complex thinking skills. Those skills appear to be well matched with the potential of Web 2.0 tools, so why aren't schools using Web 2.0 tools more? Students are increasingly disengaged from instructional processes and learning materials, which they often see as irrelevant to their future and boring within the context of their lives outside of school.

Increasing numbers of students carry cell phones, have one or more video game devices, and have Internet-connected computers at home. For example, 64% of K–12 students play video games an average of 8–10 hours per week, and 70% of students in grades 6–12 consider themselves to be advanced users of technology tools (Project Tomorrow, 2008). They experience a highly engaging and interconnected world outside—but not within—their classrooms.

So what steps can principals take to start using Web 2.0 tools to move schools toward more student-centered learning practices, thus creating a more congruent and engaging world for students?

A Powerful Example

Recognize that you may be the most important factor affecting the level of engagement of students in your school. Your own expectations and technology use can have a profound effect on the way your school's existing technology resources are used (Moses, 2006). Of course, two common communication methods that you can expect your staff members to use regularly are e-mail and your school Web site. But in addition to those tools, what's being used in your classrooms? As the title of Scott McLeod's blog for school leaders—www.dangerously irrelevant.org—implies, classroom activities can border on "dangerously irrelevant." Here's how you can ensure that this doesn't describe your school.

Talk About Student-Centered Learning

Engage in dialogue with your teachers, asking them to think about how the technology

resources available at your school can support student-centered learning. If your expectations include using technology with students, then help your teachers by looking at examples of how to incorporate technology into instruction and asking them to do the same. Consider using Edutopia's free project-based learning resources (www.edutopia.org/project-learning and www.edutopia.org/teaching-module-pbl) for these discussions.

Let the Content Come to You

Now it's time to get serious. In the December Technology Tips article, Julia Fallon advised you to set up an aggregator. These are also called "feed readers," and they are free. You'll want to use one because you want the content to come to you, not the other way around. Let the technology help you—sign up for Bloglines or GoogleReader (see figure 1) and then add a few blogs to your account to get started. While writing this article, I asked one principal friend of mine how many blogs he follows in his aggregator. His answer: "Ten educational blogs, 12 tech-related sites, 5 news sites, and 3 sports sites is all I can handle."

Your aggregator might start with just a few and grow gradually as you come across more blogs that have information you need. If you end up with too many, or your interests change, you can unsubscribe from some of them. Set aside time to visit your feed reader page. Make a habit of doing this daily, such as when you read your e-mails in the morning.

Save and Share Your Stuff

Here's where the fun begins. I recommend that you create a social bookmarking site to replace saving bookmarks to your office computer. There are many social bookmarking services

Figure 1

Setting Up an Aggregator

1. Go to www.bloglines.com or www.google.com/reader and set up an account for yourself using your favorite e-mail address. It's free.

2. Add the following sites to your account to start feeding your feed reader (aggregator). As you come across more blogs, you can add them too.

   http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/leadertalk

   www.principalspage.com/theblog

   http://practicalprincipals.net

   www.principalspolicyblog.org/blog

   http://naesp.typepad.com/blog

3. Set aside time each day to read (or at least skim) the blog posts that appear in your feed reader. You might want to add a shortcut to your reader on your computer desktop to make it easier to make this a daily habit.

available. Two popular ones are www.delicious.com and www.diigo.com. Just as you did with your aggregator, set up an account and get in the habit of using it daily. When you visit a Web page that you want to come back to, just tag it with words that identify the topic and hit save. Once you've saved Web links this way, you'll be able to access and share information with your teachers. This is where you'll start to see the benefits of collective wisdom and power sharing. A librarian friend of mine suggested that principals tell their teachers about "the power of personal learning networks; it has changed my learning profoundly."

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technology tips

Wikis let several people cocreate a Web site. Both blogs and wikis are good tools for teachers to create classroom Web sites and for groups of staff members to work on a project together.

Become an Online Collaborative Communicator

Be a commenter. As reading blogs becomes part of your routine, notice that you can also comment about blog entries. Here and there you will find a blog entry that really strikes a chord in you. When that happens, add a comment in response. This will help you get comfortable with the other side of the read/write Web—the side where you are the content creator and the content can appear instantly. Of course, this is also the point at which you recognize these are public spaces where your words have great impact. This will also help you gain firsthand knowledge of the read/write Web to better guide your students in appropriate Internet use.

Be a blogger. There may come a time when you realize that you have something to say, and that you want to start your own blog. This might be a good time to ask your school librarian for help because they are trained to be information power brokers. The librarian might recommend using an education-centered service, such as www.edublogs.org, or perhaps just one of the standard blog services, such as www.blogger.com or www.wordpress.com. Another option is to ask your IT department whether your school has the necessary resources to set up a blog for you on a school server. Better yet, your district may already have a coordinated plan for setting up and supporting blogs for all staff members. If they don't have such a plan, it's time for you to collaborate with them on the idea.

Use wikis and other collaborative online tools. Wikis let several people cocreate a Web site. Both blogs and wikis are good tools for teachers to create classroom Web sites and for groups of staff members to work on a project together. For example, you might be about to write a grant proposal to fund a particular project. You can use a wiki to flesh out your ideas, ask other staff members to add their ideas, and write the proposal together. Or you can use GoogleDocs (http://docs.google.com) to edit a document, spreadsheet, or presentation file and then download the finished product when you need it.

Watch for Clouds

Much of the content being created with Web 2.0 tools is now being stored using "cloud computing." This means that content that has been created by students and staff members is being saved on servers elsewhere on the Internet, not on the school's servers. You may be thinking that your school, like many others, currently blocks Web 2.0 tools because of bandwidth concerns, safety concerns, or both. Let's go back to the first idea: you're the example that your school follows. Start a new conversation about Web 2.0 tools and find thoughtful new solutions to embrace them. You will be helping your staff members and students enter the future of education. **PL**

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