BOOK REVIEW

Web 2.0 Schools: Learning and Social Participation

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Julia Davies and Guy Merchant
Web 2.0 Schools: Learning and Social Participation
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A mismatch is sometimes seen between the literacy and communication that learners use outside the classroom in digital communication, and the literacy that is developed inside the classroom. Whilst without doubt real efforts are being made to develop Web 2.0 applications for educational practice, in some environments there may also be a gap between the use of web 2.0 by students and the perception by teachers of its usefulness to develop real world learning outcomes.

Web 2.0 for Schools addresses this by detailing the precise nature of key Web 2.0 applications, from Flickr to wikis, demonstrating how the applications can be used in the classroom, with excellent examples. Despite having the inherent vulnerability of any specialist proposing a specific approach, the book provides both a useful practical guide for teachers interested in harnessing Web 2.0 for learning, and a critical reflection on its use. It strongly supports the view that there is now more than one literacy to be learned in schools.

Chapter 1, Education and Web 2.0: Transforming Learning – An Introduction, provides important background, highlighting the contemporary world of Web 2.0 where users have a presence and identity that are easy to modify, and through which they are able to generate their own content, and interact socially. Key arguments for the development of Web 2.0 literacy are developed (young people are already enthusiastically engaged with it) as well as arguments against (literacy is being eroded and most online participation is trivial, repetitive, and limited).

Chapter 2 provides the theory for what is to come. The description of communicative events put forward by Barton (1994) is extended to Web 2.0 applications in which interaction is proposed as a set of textually mediated social practices.
where text means words and numbers, but also other screen based semiotic communication. Emphasis is again given to the participatory nature of Web 2.0 in creating and maintaining often global social networks that are environments for active participatory learning that is not bound by time or space, and in developing identities through the creation of cultural artifacts, such as the books an individual may be reading or the music they may be listening to.

Chapter 3, Out There, defines blogs and blogging, outlines the massive levels of blogging activity, citing an estimate in 2006 of 50 million live blogs (Technorati, 2006). It gives examples of what blogs can look like, showing their participatory nature for originators as well as contributors. Blogs are proposed as a tool or vehicle in which learning is developed, with recommendations for use by teachers and learners.

Chapter 4, Photo Sharing – Welcome To The World of Flickr, details one site (Flickr), as a means to demonstrate the nature and scope of photosharing sites in general. A useful example shows how photographs can be used as a categorization activity in the classroom. The use of tags is outlined, and the ensuing folksonomy detailed in terms of its participative and socially interactive nature. Another example details how photosharing was used as tool to link the relationship between words and images, in the context of a project on food.

Chapter 5, YouTube As a Verb, uses one videosharing site as an example of the genre. Issues for educators are explored, such as the risk of exposure of learners to offensive materials, and arguments for and against the blocking of YouTube in schools. Practical features of the site are given, such the embedding of a material in another site by use of video code, and practical uses for learners are provided in examples such as a six year old and an eight year girl creating a ‘how to’ video on cake making (calling themselves ‘The Perklets’), and thus creating a cultural artifact for participatory social interaction and learning.

In Chapter 6, Good Vibrations: From Napster to Last.FM, copyright and legality in music sharing are detailed, and less obvious aspects such as the role of the DJ, sampling and remixing discussed. A useful example of use of music sharing for learners is given, entailing a sharing activity and subsequent blogging used by a music teacher.

Chapter 7, Virtual Worlds and Real Futures again uses examples of virtual worlds to demonstrate their nature and range, relating virtual worlds like Second Life to key concepts of presence, modification, user generated content and social participation. There are good examples of how virtual worlds can be used in the classroom, which do not gloss over practical limitations.

Chapter 8, Wikis: The Death of the Author, uses examples to show how wikis can be used by learners to collaborate and create text. Features of Wikipedia are justifiably prominent in this chapter, which also addresses the issues of anonymity, bias and neutrality, and vandalism. This chapter again is supported by practical examples of how wikis have been used in the classroom, and details advantages, including the valuing of collaboration over individualism, and the valuing of referencing.

Chapter 9, Response and Responsibility, sums up the detailing and discussion of the key Web 2.0 applications, giving a guidance framework for teachers to integrate the applications into classroom learning. It revisits central arguments for and against the use of Web 2.0 in classrooms, with the benefit of the greater knowledge and perspective that the previous chapters have provided.

Chapter 10, the Conclusion, revisits characteristics of Web 2.0, relating them again to the features of presence, modification, user generated content and participation, and crystallizing the view that the objects in Web 2.0 applications, be they photos, music, a wiki or other objects, become social objects, or cultural artifacts, and hence ‘learning objects.’ The social interaction around these objects becomes the learning community, independent of time and location, that Davies and Merchant suggest is the fertile ground for an educational transformation.

This book takes a huge step in reconciling the opposing views of Web 2.0 applications.
Even those least likely to use them in the classroom, worried by issues like triviality or repetitiveness of communication, have been provided with arguments and examples which make these applications easy to understand and implement.

The argumentation in *Web 2.0 for Schools* is settled around a handful of central points, and there are times when reiteration of these could have been less full, and time spent more on developing key chapters more completely, such as the relatively short chapter on wikis. More on the purely social networking sites would also have been useful.

It may not easy to propose the educational centrality of an online world that emphasizes online engagement more than the actual information communicated. Compared to other publications in the field, the vision offered here is complete, clear and eminently accessible. Sound and wide ranging research data have been used to present balanced arguments, from which practical approaches for teachers are developed. The celebration of new ways of communicating by young people is at the heart of this book’s success, providing insight and material that cannot fail to inspire teachers to bring the lively worlds of Web 2.0 into the classroom.

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