Chapter 1
Social Software as Tools for Pedagogical Transformation: Enabling Personalization, Creative Production, and Participatory Learning

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ABSTRACT

The main agents of change in the present era can be posited as globalization and the diffusion and uptake of technologies that have given rise to a knowledge-based, networked society. The latest evolution of the Internet, Web 2.0, is resulting in significant transformations in terms of how we live, work, and communicate. In the higher education arena, the drive towards self-organizing communities and collaboration through social networking applications has triggered widespread debate on the purpose of education, with a growing emphasis on the need not only to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and information, but also to cultivate in students the skills and digital literacies necessary to engage with social and technological change. In this chapter, the authors discuss the affordances of Web 2.0 and social software tools, and provide examples of current conceptualizations and metaphors of learning that leverage these affordances to support learner choice, autonomy, and agency in the creation of ideas and knowledge artifacts. An innovative learning paradigm is proposed that the authors call Pedagogy 2.0, based on the key elements of personalization, participation, and productivity. Finally, the authors argue for a more holistic and evidence-based approach to research and evaluation of Web 2.0-based learning programs and initiatives that supports the development and sharing of best practices across academic disciplines, institutions, and countries.

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INTRODUCTION

In the present landscape of technological and social transformation, significant and ongoing changes are underway that are impacting how we live and work. Concurrent social trends, such as the diversification of life trajectories, multiple career paths, re-skilling, and flexible working hours, are leading to new paradigms of education and learning. There is a change in the view of what education is for, with a growing emphasis on the need to support not only the acquisition of conceptual knowledge in a specific subject area or domain, but also the development of life skills and resources necessary to engage with social and technical change, and to continue learning throughout life (Owen, Grant, Sayers, & Facer, 2006; Fischer & Konomi, 2005).

The rapid diffusion of information and communications technologies (ICTs), in particular the Internet and World Wide Web, has fuelled the growth of the “information age” and “knowledge-based society,” and in recent years we have been witnessing the rise of “Web 2.0” (O’Reilly, 2005). Epitomized by the proliferation of social technologies that are less about “narrowcasting” to individuals, Web 2.0 tools are more focused on the creation of communities that allow people with common interests to meet, collaborate, learn from each other, and build new digital resources. Web 2.0 is therefore not merely a technological shift or new suite of tools; it is also a social movement that opens up new opportunities to communicate, interact, and share data. The new ease of connectivity enables greater participation and thereby offers users a range of pathways, modes, and styles of working and learning. The increased emphasis on user-generated content, data and resource sharing, and collaborative effort, together with the availability of a raft of innovative social software applications, signals that the Web is a powerful platform for generating, repurposing, and remixing content.

Robinson (2005) talks of the “people-centric Web,” which is all about “conversations, interpersonal networking, personalization, and individualism” (Abram, 2005, p. 44). When we consider the constantly expanding lexicon of Web 2.0 applications (Web logs [blogs], wikis, podcasts, Really Simple Syndication [RSS] feeds, social tagging, mash-ups, Twittering, modding, and the list goes on) it becomes clear that they signal changes in the learning landscape. Applied to education, we are invited to envision learners as active participants, creators of knowledge, and seekers of personal, engaging experiences. In what has been called a culture of participation, the line separating consumers and producers of content is becoming blurred, as the term “prosumers” indicates. As Web 2.0 users, our students are often actively creating and sharing content and ideas in this new knowledge space. The independence and digital skills displayed by Generation Y stand in stark contrast to the control culture of education, in which teacher-controlled syllabi and assessment tasks dominate, and in which learning is commonly perceived as the absorption of information from textbooks and other “authoritative” sources. Beyond the walls of formal places of learning (schools, colleges, universities), there is a plethora of online networks populated by self-directed, vital, self-managed learners who are capable of generating new ideas. These are thriving knowledge-creating communities that are open to all who wish to participate.

In discussing the implications of Web 2.0 for education, we must expand our vision of pedagogy so that we view students as active participants or co-producers of knowledge rather than passive consumers of content, and strive to create learning opportunities that are participatory, social processes supportive of personal life goals and aspirations. There is a compelling need not only to engage with and capitalize on the digital literacies and tools that learners are already conversant with, but also to equip them...