

S E C O N D E D I T I O N

**BLOGS,
WIKIS,
PODCASTS,**

and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms

Will Richardson



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1 The Read/ Write Web

Tim Berners-Lee had a grand vision for the Internet when he began development of the World Wide Web in 1989. “The original thing I wanted to do,” Berners-Lee said, “was make it a collaborative medium, a place where we [could] all meet and read and write” (as cited in Carvin, 2005). At the time, the Internet was not much more than a network of computers that researchers and government officials used to share text and data, just a small blip on the radar screens of all but the most technologically savvy. But Berners-Lee saw the potential to construct a vast “web” of linked information, built by people from around the globe, creating the ability to share not just data but personal talents and experiences in new and powerful ways.

The first part of Berners-Lee’s dream came to fruition in 1993 with the development of the Mosaic Web browser. Seemingly overnight, the Internet went from a text and numbers-based research tool for the few to a colorful, graphical world of information for the masses. Even though content was limited in those early days, millions of people soon started going online to read or “surf” the Web for information and entertainment. And as access spread, connections became faster, and more and more Web designers and authors set up shop, the twentieth century ended with the Internet taking its place as an essential communications and research network connecting people around the globe.

But even with that initial period of immense and rapid growth, the original vision of being able to read *and* write to the Web was slow (in Internet terms, at least) to be realized. Writing to the Web required knowledge of the HTML codes that make Web pages work and of the protocols to get those pages up and running on the Internet. To be sure, there were text-based newsgroups to share ideas and some sites like Amazon.com where readers could leave reviews and opinions. But for the most part, the ability to create content on the Web was nowhere near as easy as consuming it, and even those who could create did so with little means for easy collaboration.

A NEW WORLD WIDE WEB

Today, however, that's no longer the case.

The past few years have seen the development of a wide variety of easy Internet publishing tools that has done much to fulfill Berners-Lee's concept of a Read/Write Web. As early as 2003, a Pew Internet & American Life Project found that more than 53 million American adults, or 44 percent of adult Internet users, had used the Internet to publish their thoughts, respond to others, post pictures, share files, and otherwise contribute to the explosion of content available online (Lenhart, Fallows, & Horrigan, 2004). And in 2005, another Pew study showed 57 percent of all teens who use the Internet could be considered "content creators" (<http://tinyurl.com/y4933k>). Today, in 2008, those numbers have no doubt increased significantly.

In early 2008, Technorati.com, one of many blog tracking services, listed over 110 million blogs (short for Weblogs), the first widely adopted easy publishing tool of the Read/Write Web, which people use to create personal journals of their lives, build resource sites with colleagues, or filter the news of the day for audiences large and small with no need to know how to code pages or transfer files. At this writing, the service was adding over 120,000 new blogs and a 1.5 million Weblog posts *each day*. In other words, the new two-way Web has officially arrived.

And it's not just blogs: In the last two years, multimedia publishing by the masses has exploded. In early 2008, over 100,000 videos were being uploaded to YouTube.com each day, just one of dozens of popular video publishing sites on the Web. Millions of photos, thousands of audio files, and countless other creations are now being added every day to the incredibly vast storehouse of information that the Web has become. As more people get more access to broadband connections and more powerful computers and even easier tools, this trend shows every sign of continuing to grow. We're in the midst of an explosion of technologies that will continue to remake the Web into the community, participatory space Berners-Lee originally envisioned, changing much of our lives in significant ways. These changes are already playing out in politics, journalism, and business. And from an educational standpoint, this new Read/Write Web promises to transform much of how we teach and learn as well.

For most, however, even now almost a decade into the Read/Write Web, the significance of these changes is still just starting to be realized. We are no longer limited to being independent readers or consumers of information; as we'll see, we can be collaborators in the creation of large storehouses of information. In the process, we can learn much about ourselves and our world. In almost every area of life, the Read/Write Web is changing our relationship to technology and rewriting the age-old paradigms of how things work. No

doubt, these changes will take many more years to process. In fact, what author Dan Gillmor wrote a few years ago still holds true today, “The people who’ll understand this best are probably just being born” (Gillmor, 2005).

EXTRAORDINARY CHANGES

The Read/Write Web holds transformational changes in store for teachers and students of all stripes. But, as is often the case, education has been slow to adapt to these new tools and potentials. In other areas of our lives, however, we can see some of these transformations happening right now, right in front of our eyes.

Take politics, for example. At this writing, we’re in the midst of the “YouTube Campaign,” as some have called it. Every major candidate for president has made extensive use of blogs and video and podcasts throughout the campaign. Each has a MySpace page, attempting to take advantage of the power of social networking, and the voting public has had more ways of engaging in the conversation around the issues than ever before. Each is using the Web to connect to their very passionate supporters, allowing them to invest their own time and creativity and, in many cases, money in the cause. The very model of how we run campaigns and “do” politics is changing right in front of us, driven by these technologies that allow us to connect and collaborate more easily than ever before.

The ability to easily publish text, pictures, and video is changing the face of journalism and media as we know it as well. There is no better example than coverage of the heartbreaking Indian Ocean earthquake and resulting tsunami that killed upwards of 150,000 people just after Christmas in 2004 (or, for that matter, the horrible devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in the summer of 2005). Within minutes of the event, links to gripping first-person accounts coupled with digital photos and video were spreading throughout the “blogosphere,” providing the type of raw detail that usually wouldn’t appear in the media. Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org), a collaborative encyclopedia built on a *wiki* that anyone with an Internet connection can use to publish to and edit, became a clearinghouse of information based on the work of thousands of amateur researchers who published facts and photos and links as they found them. In recognition of these efforts, *The New York Times*, the paragon of traditional journalism, noted that bloggers “were hard to beat” when it came to early coverage of the catastrophe (Schwartz, 2004). And that new model has been repeated over and over as big news stories hit on national or local levels.

In reality, the Read/Write Web has created millions of amateur reporters who now have their own digital printing presses. It’s also created millions of

amateur editors who are, in blogging parlance, ready to “fact check your a**” whenever a major story breaks. And today, even the newspapers themselves are inviting their readers to participate, understanding what former-reporter-turned-blogger Dan Gillmor knew early on: “If my readers know more than I do (which I know they do), I can include them in the process of making my journalism better” (as cited in Kosman, 2005). In 2007, *USA Today* made it possible for readers to comment on any story, adding opinion, asking further questions, or even correcting what’s been written, and most other online newspapers are following suit. In essence, every article is a blog post. By including people in the process, this new Web creates all sorts of opportunities for participatory journalism, which, of course, creates all sorts of new definitions and descriptions of just what journalism is. Traditional media outlets such as *The Washington Post*, the BBC, and others are scrambling to respond to this trend, creating interactive spaces for readers, buying on-the-spot news photos from people with camera phones, and running amateur video of news events. These are huge, transformative shifts to a model that has lasted for hundreds of years, and these changes show no signs of slowing.

More recently, businesses have begun exploring the use of Weblogs and wikis for a variety purposes, from public relations to customer service to internal communications. When Microsoft began offering up Weblog space to some of its developers a few years ago, potential customers had an opportunity to not only read about the inner workings of the company, they had a chance to respond and participate. And IBM, one of the most successful companies in history, is transforming the way it connects and communicates. As of mid-2007, Big Blue was running over 20,000 internal wiki sites, 26,000 blogs, and over 400,000 of its full- and part-time employees were participating in “Blue Pages,” IBM’s own MySpace-type social networking system. This new transparency and opening up is now an expectation, especially in a world where users of particular products can connect and communicate their experiences with one another. In this world, we create our own advertisements, and businesses are having to play by some very different rules. Now, hundreds of corporations including GM, Coca-Cola, Sun Microsystems, and Apple have blogs and wikis, and many CEOs are beginning to catch on to blogging as well.

No matter how you look at it, we are creating what author Douglas Rushkoff calls a “society of authorship” where every teacher and every student—every person with access—will have the ability to contribute ideas and experiences to the larger body of knowledge that is the Internet. And in doing so, Rushkoff says, we will be writing the human story, in real time, together, a vision that asks each of us to participate (Rushkoff, 2004).

In addition, this new Web is forcing us to re-examine many of the basic ways in which we live our lives. These technologies make more of our lives

transparent to others in ways that many find unsettling. And, there is a growing gap between how this digital generation defines privacy and the way most adults do. To our kids, making their lives come alive online is just a part of the way they live. Communicating and collaborating with peers using IM or text messaging, Twitter or their MySpace accounts allows them to be “always on” and always connected. That is their expectation, one that has changed greatly in just the past ten years. And the reality is we are not going to get any less plugged in or any less open in terms of how we live our lives. These shifts will only become more acute.

THE READ/WRITE WEB IN EDUCATION

For all those reasons and more, I think this is a hugely challenging time to be an educator. The world is changing around us, yet as a system, we have been very, very slow to react. Our students’ realities in terms of the way they communicate and learn are very different from our own. By and large, they are “out there” using a wide variety of technologies that they are told they can’t use when they come to school. They are building vast social networks with little or no guidance from adults. They are using much more complex and flexible digital information by and large without any instruction on how it differs from the paper world.

In the two years since the first printing of this book, tens of thousands of teachers and students have begun using some of these tools, but the vast majority of educators still have little or no context for these shifts. And more importantly, very few people, educators or otherwise, have yet to experience the transformative potential of these new tools in terms of their own personal learning. Without question, our ability to easily publish content online and to connect to vast networks of passionate learners will force us to rethink the way we communicate with our constituents, the way we deliver our curriculum, and the expectations we have of our students. The Web also has the potential to radically change what we assume about teaching and learning, and it presents us with important questions to consider: What needs to change about our curriculum when our students have the ability to reach audiences far beyond our classroom walls? What changes must we make in our teaching as it becomes easier to bring primary sources to our students? How do we need to rethink our ideas of literacy when we must prepare our students to become not only readers and writers, but editors and collaborators and publishers as well? And, I think most importantly, how can we as learners begin to take advantage of the opportunities these tools present, so we may understand more clearly the pedagogies of using them in the classroom?

2

Weblogs

Pedagogy and Practice

The first time I saw a Weblog, I knew I was looking at something very different from a “regular” Webpage. Metafilter.org was one of only a handful of collaborative/community blogs back in 2001, where thousands of “members” were able to post funny or interesting links to a page, and where other members could leave their own opinions about those links just as easily. It was, and is, a fairly undistinguished looking site; lots of text and very few of the typical bells and whistles. But I will never forget the first time I posted my opinion, and the first time someone responded to it. There was something really powerful about *easily* being able to share resources and ideas with a Web *audience* that was willing to share back what they thought about those ideas.

In essence, that’s still what I find so powerful about Weblogs today, more than seven years later. Writing to the Web is easy. And there is an audience for my ideas. Those two concepts are at the core of why I think Weblogs have such huge potential in an educational setting.

What exactly is a Weblog? In its most general sense, a Weblog is an easily created, easily updateable Website that allows an author (or authors) to publish instantly to the Internet from any Internet connection. The earliest blogs were literally “Web logs” or lists of sites a particular author visited on any given day that would be revised by changing the HTML code and updating the file on a server. But soon, the Internet geeks who maintained these sites developed software to automate the process and allow other people to collaborate. Happily, blogging today doesn’t require any knowledge of code or FTP. It takes as much skill as sending an e-mail.

But what really distinguishes a blog from your run-of-the-mill Website is much more than process; it’s what you’ll find there. Weblogs are not built on static chunks of content. Instead, they are comprised of reflections and conversations that in many cases are updated every day (if not three or four

times a day). Blogs engage readers with ideas and questions and links. They ask readers to think and to respond. They demand interaction.

Take educator and blogger David Jakes's "The Strength of Weak Ties" blog as an example (<http://tinyurl.com/2blpv1>, as shown in Figure 2.1). Visitors to his site can see his latest post at the top of the middle column, and if they scroll down the page, they can read what Dave has been posting for the last couple of months. Among the things readers might find are reflections from his daily work, links to interesting or educational sites on the Web, ideas for lessons, or responses to the thoughts and ideas of other bloggers. And for every post, readers can leave a comment that subsequent visitors to the site will be able to view. Typical comments on Dave's blog come from other teachers who share their own experiences, ask questions for clarification or to push his thinking, and offer links to other relevant pieces of content. In this way, blogs are a collaborative space, as readers become a part of the writing and learning process.

Figure 2.1 David Jakes' blog "The Strength of Weak Ties" is one of many popular "edu" blogs. Like most, regular posts are featured in the middle column while links to other bloggers and archives can be found in the side columns.



Dave's Weblog is also filled with links, another key characteristic of Weblogs. He has links to podcasts that he's created, personal affiliations, and