
Preface to the Third Edition

It's been over four years since the first edition of this book was published and now, over 50,000 copies later, it's feeling like the world is a bit of a different place. Whereas blogs and RSS feeds and wikis were still just blips on the radar back in 2006, today, social Web media and online networks are a part of the mainstream conversation when it comes to politics, media, and business. And, yes, to some extent, education. Not that schools are rushing to embrace these tools in any systemic way . . . yet. However, there's no doubt that more teachers, more administrators, more parents, and more students are beginning to understand how learning is changing because of the connections we can make on the Web. That's the good news.

The not-so-good news is that those numbers are still nowhere near large enough. Just like we did four years ago, we live in a world where the following condition still exists: A growing majority of students are immersed in social networks and technologies outside of school, and most have no adults in their lives who are teaching them how to use those connections to learn. At a time when our access to information, people, and ideas is exploding online, that reality is simply unacceptable. Our collective inability to recognize a “tectonic shift” in the way we learn stems, I believe, from one fundamental fact—not enough of us have experienced that shift for ourselves. These shifts will not come under the guise of “twenty-first-century skills” reforms which are actually nineteenth-century skills being remarketed for a new day. They will only come when enough educators fully understand the open connections, open conversations, open content, and open learning that come as a part of a community of learners who are invested in their own passions.

The tools that are discussed in this book are simply that: tools. And as the chapters herein illustrate, learning how to use the tools is not difficult.

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Weblogs

Pedagogy and Practice

The first time I saw a Weblog, I knew I was looking at something very different from a “regular” Web page. 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 so 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 nine 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 Web site 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 Web site 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

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Wikis

Easy Collaboration for All

Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we're doing.

—Jimmy Wales, Wikipedia founder

If you want to find the most important site on the Web these days, look no further than Wikipedia.org (see Figure 4.1). As its name suggests, Wikipedia is an encyclopedia, one that really is attempting to store the “sum of human knowledge.” By the time you read this, the English version of Wikipedia will house over 3 million separate entries with information about everything from the Aaadonta (a type of slug) to Zzzax (a fictional super villain from Marvel Comics). Every day, new entries are being added about people, places, things, historical events, and even today’s news almost as it happens. It’s truly an amazing resource.

But whereas most people get the “pedia” part of the name, only a few really understand the first part, the “wiki.” And believe it or not, that’s the most important part, because without the wiki, this encyclopedia, this growing repository of all we know and do, could not exist. The word *wiki* is a short form of the Hawaiian *wiki-wiki*, which means “quick.” Ward Cunningham created the first wiki in 1995, who was looking to design an easy authoring tool that might spur people to publish. And the key word here is “easy,” because, plainly put, a wiki is a Web site where anyone can edit anything anytime they want.

So, have some knowledge about your favorite hobby that isn’t on Wikipedia? Add it. Read something you think isn’t correct? Fix it. Don’t like the way one of the entries is written? Erase it. Something big just happen in the news that is history making? Start a new entry. You have the power, because every time you access Wikipedia, or most any other wiki for that

Figure 5.1 Google Reader offers a clean and intuitive interface for scanning and reading your RSS feeds.



READING AND SHARING

So now that you've gotten the RSS bug, it's time to explore further what you can do with Reader and with RSS feeds in general. And there is a lot.

First, as you read the individual posts of information that come through your aggregator, you can begin to organize those that you find most relevant for later retrieval. (You may also want to do this using social bookmarks, which we'll discuss in the next chapter.) For each post, you have the ability to add your own personal "tags" or keywords that identify what that piece of content means to you. At the bottom right of each post is a link that says "Edit Tags." When you click it, you can type in as many keywords as you like. For instance, if I was reading a post on using Lulu.com to self-publish student books, I might tag it with the words "publishing, tools, fund-raiser, English101." (Single words work best, so you may have to mash together some multiword tags as in the last example.) For every tag you use, Reader creates a separate folder where it