

Youth and Free Web Based Applications

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THEME: Youth

Appropriate Technologies

INTRODUCTION

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) promotes the use of technology in education and training to help expand access to and quality of education. The use of Web 2.0 technologies in industrialised countries is promoting social and cultural shifts that are having an impact on how students interact with their social environments and cultural identities. COL constantly investigates how Web 2.0 technologies can be used across borders and other barriers to help expand access to and quality of education.

COL uses a range of Web 2.0 technologies and applications and some of these may be useful in educational institutions.

BACKGROUND

Is the educational sector embracing the world of Web 2.0, social software and new media which preoccupies young people today? Keeping youth engaged in learning is an overwhelming challenge.

Web 2.0 applications are fast becoming the mainstream means of communicating with colleagues, friends and communities of practice. Not only are these applications usually free, web-based and collaborative, they are often based on open source software which means that third-party add-on functions and improvements are being written and made freely available everyday. They are very different from first generation web tools which rely on “pushing information out” via web pages for people to read, i.e. users can normally only interact with web pages via emails or a feedback form available on the website. In contrast, Web 2.0 technology and web design aim to facilitate creativity, information sharing, and, notably, the applications are collaborative or contributive. That is, they enable the user to interact with other users via the website. With these advanced capacities, a second generation of web-based communities and hosted services, such as social networking sites, wikis, and blogs are evolving. At first glance, many of the applications may seem trivial and not suited to education. The Internet itself also seemed that way to many academics a few years ago. But times have changed and few institutions are likely to see themselves not having an Internet presence any more. The potential for the use of these tools as a means for international social interaction is unprecedented and remains relatively unexplored in education.

Should we facilitate the use of these Web 2.0 interaction tools as a way of encouraging youth to not only stay in the educational system after completing their qualification, but also to contribute and share their own knowledge? Web 2.0 applications such as social software encourage user-centeredness, assisting youth in their quest for finding their own autonomy and identity. These motivating factors offer a strong sense of personal ownership and can contribute to more engaged learning.

The user-centeredness of Web 2.0 technologies and the learner-centeredness of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) could make for a good partnership. The “content” side of education is delivered in ODL by the study materials whereas the “learning” aspect is assisted by the tutor. This highlights the difference between non-formal education (i.e. outside the classroom) and formal education. The polished presentations of teachers and lecturers in classrooms is removed

and the act of listening and careful, responsive questioning of learners becomes the most important facet of teaching.

Challenges to the use of Web 2.0 technologies are going to arise as the issues of collaboration versus individual effort and self-esteem over knowledge become harder to separate. The importance of students accepting the need to sometimes work as an individual and solve problems without help must not be negated. Finding the right balance of personal skills and collaboration skills is an area which might become more difficult for students if they come to heavily rely on Web 2.0 collaboration applications, especially if these tools were a main part of their primary education.

TECHNOLOGIES

Social Bookmarking

Social Bookmarking is saving an Internet address (often called a "URL" or Universal resource Locator"), to a public web site. The address is then tagged with a keyword that helps others to find and use the same address. The difference between bookmarking a site on your own computer and a social bookmark is that social bookmarks can be assigned to be "public" or "private", thus allowing a set of resources to be collected and shared with others. It can simplify the distribution of reference lists, bibliographies, papers, and other resources among peers or students.

Examples of Social Bookmarking sites are <http://www.diigo.com/> and <http://del.icio.us/>

COL actively uses this technology to create and share resources at <http://www.diigo.com/user/amymonaghan> and a sub-group has been added so that others can join and add their own content at <http://groups.diigo.com/groups/colcol> . Should you wish to join this group please contact me at amonaghan@col.org

Custom Searching

Another Web 2.0 application that is used extensively by COL is Google's "Custom Search". This forms the backbone of COL's Knowledge Finder which is a service to assist educational practitioners in locating information on the Internet. Searches are customised and only websites relevant to the individual topic are indexed. There are 33 specialised search fields available via the website at www.col.org/kf and these are linked to pages throughout the website wherever they are appropriate to the information provided on that page on the site.

Organising Microcontent

This could also be called a "Start Page". A "Start Page" lets you create an online, personalised and dynamic place to access all your favourite links when you are either at your own computer or away from home or work. Typically, you can add web feeds and bookmarks, get notified of new email, see calendar entries, photos from Flickr, news headlines or your favourite cartoon of the day. At your own computer you can have the start page as your home page which automatically loads when you open your web browser. If you are using a remote computer you can open a web browser and logon to your start page and have instant access.

Examples of Start Pages are <http://www.yourminis.com/>, <http://www.pageflakes.com/> and <http://www.netvibes.com/>.

At <http://www.yourminis.com/> it is possible to publish your start pages and these have been used by COL to store links to papers in various subject areas. These can be viewed at:

<http://www.yourminis.com/yourminis/COL/researchad>
<http://www.yourminis.com/yourminis/COL/researcheh>

<http://www.yourminis.com/yourminis/COL/researchiz>
<http://www.yourminis.com/yourminis/COL/researchop>
<http://www.yourminis.com/yourminis/COL/researchqz>

Social Networking

The great appeal for many people is the very fact that as its name suggests: it is a social outlet. Social networking technology is software that allows people to come together around an idea or topic of interest. The same as the line between work and non-work activities is blurring, the same could apply to education and online social networking if the educational community fosters these groups to support learning.

There are general social sites such as <http://www.facebook.com/> (North American), <http://www.bebo.com/> (UK) <http://www.freindster.com/> (Southeast Asia), <http://hi5.com/> (India) and <http://www.piczo.com/> (teens) and sites which cater to forming professional work ties such as <http://www.linkedin.com/> .

There are also sites which allow the creation and hosting of your own social site such as <http://www.ning.com/> and <http://www.crowdvine.com/home>. These spaces can be private (by invitation only) or public (open to everyone without an invitation necessary). By creating your own social site, topics of interests can be discussed in a more controlled environment. For example, should a group of youth wish to discuss governance issues then only those people interested in governance would join the group. Two sites have been created at Ning to demonstrate how these could work.

Examples of customised social sites are:

<http://colcol.ning.com/> (for those interested in Open and Distance Learning)
<http://l3farmers.ning.com/> (L3 Farmers project)

Blogging

A blog is a user-generated website where text entries are made in a diary or journal style. It is a way of collecting links to webpages, sharing ideas, music, video, images and audio. Blogs are easy to make and posting is instantaneous. Content is displayed in a reverse chronological order.

Contributing to a blog and reading other blogs can bring youth from different cultural backgrounds together in a shared experience. Participating in blogging can have many positive influences on youth including: creativity, technical literacy improvement, developing self-esteem, cross-cultural awareness and critical-thinking skills.

Examples of Blogging platforms are <http://wordpress.com/> and <https://www.blogger.com/>

Examples of blogs for different topics include:

<http://www.takingitglobal.org/> (governance)
<http://oedb.org/library/features/top-100-education-blogs> (list of top 100 education blogs)

Podcasts

Podcasting involves making an audio file of content that is designed to be played back on portable media players and/or personal computers. Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication (RSS) is a format for publishing regularly changing web content (e.g., a blog, news feeds, a podcast, a videocast). Using RSS one can subscribe to podcast and it is this capacity for syndication that distinguishes podcasts from other downloadable media content.

Anyone can create his or her own "radio"-style show and broadcast it to the world in very little time and at very little cost.

Examples of podcasting sites are:

<http://www.epnweb.org/> (list of educational podcasting programmes)

<http://oedb.org/library/beginning-online-learning/skip-the-tuition:-100-free-podcasts-from-the-best-colleges-in-the-world> (100 free podcasts from Higher education institutions)

<http://edtechlive.com/Recordings+List> (interviews focus on K - 12 educational technology).

Examples of software for Podcasts are:

<http://www.gcast.com/> is a hosted service to create podcasts for free

<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/> which is a cross-platform sound editor to create podcasts

<http://www.dopplerradio.net/> is a podcast aggregator.

<http://www.apple.com/itunes/> is the dominant podcatching client

<http://www.podcatchermatrix.org/> is a place to compare, choose and discuss the various Podcatchers and their features.

<http://computer.howstuffworks.com/how-to-podcast.htm> How to create your own Podcast

Videocasting and Webcasting

The difference between Videocasting and Webcasting is that Webcasting" (broadcasting through the web) enables a presenter to transmit a live presentation (then it can be archived for later viewing like a videocast) over the Internet whereas Videocasting is not live. The technology standards required for Webcasting is considerably more than for videocasting and will not be discussed in this paper.

Video, maybe more than any other format, has the power to captivate, inform, and enthrall students. By using a popular medium such as YouTube, a very popular web site for sharing video, you are fitting into your students existing community of choice, making it easy for them to access your material, and projecting a more modern image for your school or class.

Finding appropriate videos for your class on YouTube is as simple as searching via Google. Another option is to upload your own videos. With a plain web cam and free movie maker software, you can edit the recording, add subtitles and effects, and save it in the right format.

Uploading the file is very simple. You can type in a title, description, and keywords, and choose the subject you would like it to appear in. You can also choose whether to make the video public, or to allow only invited individuals to see it. Once the video is uploaded, you can send a link to it through e-mail, or embed it in any blog or a web page.

Examples of videocasting sites are:

<http://www.sutree.com/> (an online index and library for free video-based lessons, tutorials, lectures and how-to's)

<http://www.teachertube.com/> (instructional videos)

Examples of software for Videocasting are:

<http://www.stickam.com/> Place streaming video, slide show, music, and live video chat on your blog and/or web site.

<http://makeinternettv.org/> This guide has step-by-step instructions for shooting, editing, and publishing online videos that can be watched and subscribed to by millions of people.

<http://www.youtube.com/> YouTube is a popular free video sharing website which lets users upload, view, and share video clips.

Collaborative Writing

There are a number of free web-based document packages available such as Zoho (www.zoho.com) and "Google Documents" (docs.google.com). These can be used to create and store documents that can be accessed from anywhere an Internet connection and web browser is

available. Documents are stored online and people anywhere can have access to edit the information. A number of these services are listed on the COL website under Knowledge Management (www.col.org/km).

Wikis

A wiki is a website that allows users to collaboratively create and edit web page content using any web browser. Anyone with Internet access can go online and edit pages on a wiki. Wikipedia is a well known wiki; COL hosts a community wiki called WikiEducator (<http://www.wikieducator.org/>). Wikis harness the collective contributions of multiple users. An important characteristic of wikis is that they are able to display how a document evolves over time, thus providing an audit trail of its creation. The open and collaborative nature of wikis is both an advantage, by providing transparency of a wiki entry's evolution, and a disadvantage, based on the increased danger of vandalism, unreliable, or carelessly written or researched content.

Project Management Software

COL uses a subscription service called "Basecamp" for private, online collaboration. While some groups can collaborate publicly on a Wiki (discussed later on) where anyone can join in and edit materials, some teams, especially course material development teams prefer to work in a "closed space". Each member of the team receives a personal login and only the team members are able to share the material drafts and participate in the discussion. Finished course material is usually transferred to a public website for anyone to use. There is a limited set of features that can be used free of charge, but organisations that use services like this usually find a low subscription fee much lower cost than running internet servers and the technical support associated with maintaining and backing up servers. More information on this service is at: <http://basecamphq.com/>

Mashups

A mashup is a website or web application that uses content from more than one source to create a completely new service.

An example of a mashup is COL's News Service. Prior to the development of a web service called "Yahoo Pipes", each individual internet "feed" from news sources had to be scanned by a person for relevant content. This was a very time consuming way of keeping up-to-date. These Internet feeds, called "RSS feeds", are rather like webpages that are constantly updated by the provider of the news or information source. The "Pipes" model allows for multiple RSS feeds (i.e. dynamic webpages from multiple websites) to be combined, filtered by keywords and formatted into a single output – or another webpage. An example of a Pipe for Technology & Web 2.0 news is at <http://www.col.org/colweb/site/pid/4981>. It has 77 individual news feeds (or RSSs) supplying news articles to it, with at a rate of about 190 articles per day. The number of articles you see can be reduced by choosing filter options included in the Pipes management interface.

This technology assists us to provide a constantly updated news service for educators in the Commonwealth. We have built 11 "Pipes" for different news topics and all are freely available via our website at www.col.org/newsfeeds

BROADER ISSUES

The Question of Hardware and Infrastructure

The broadband issue is slowly improving, but one third of developing countries still only have a 5% penetration rate. (Masatsugu 2004). The current lack of broadband access should not prevent educators and development agencies looking toward the new Web 2.0 applications that have removed the prohibitive cost of software from deployment. Education leaders need to build

organisational infrastructure and applications that lead the evolution in using these tools to support teaching and learning.

There have been many cost and infrastructure barriers to technology reaching the poorest sections of society, including prohibitive costs for hardware, software and Internet access. The hardware issue is being tackled by a number of different companies producing low cost laptops such as OLPC (OX-1) and Asus (Eee) that are competing in the developing country market, albeit in a traditional westernised manner. That is, the assumption that each individual should own a computer rather than sharing via Community Centres.

Licensing

The advent of new legal ways to create and distribute content has contributed to the greater availability and circulation of User Created Content (UCC). Schemes such as the Creative Commons at <http://creativecommons.org> offer a flexible method of licensing, distributing and copying derivative works of UCC.

Ethics

The issue of child/youth safety and use of sites that allow for the easy interaction between adults and children or youth needs to be addressed by individual schools.

The exposure to disciplinary action for teachers who post personal pages on public sites such as Facebook, YouTube or their own blog is increasing as access to these sites is becoming more widespread amongst youth. Some teachers have been suspended and/or fired when the wrong person -- in some cases, a student -- happened on their page. It may be necessary for schools and colleges to clearly articulate policies on public and private (non-teaching) spaces used by teachers or professors.

Web 2.0's lowered barrier to entry through its removal of the need for technical expertise has allowed the capacity to reach more youth, particularly marginalised youth. For example, a blog can be used to provide a personal space online, link and comment to other web sources, ask questions and publish work. Prior to the advent of blogs, youth were very limited in how they could express themselves to a wide ranging and diverse audience, and have that expression remain available for forever, if they so desire.

Criticisms of Web 2.0

Web 2.0 technologies are fluent and emerging at a rapid pace and as such challenges and issues will continually arise that need to be addressed on the fly. This evolution of platforms and services is mostly happening on the outside of academia and schools and how educational management is responding is often in a very ad-hoc and uncertain manner, with individual teachers rather than institutions exploring and using the technology.

There have been some arguments that the collaborative nature of Web 2.0 technologies will lead to amateurism and denigrate expertise.

CONCLUSION

Technology itself is not a silver bullet in education. Different cultures and traditions need to be understood when researching or implementing the use of technology in education. Web 2.0 applications such as Facebook, the social networking site that is hugely popular in North America may not be the best choice for use in developing countries. Whilst Web 2.0 applications have the ability to allow for cross cultural exchanges, care should be taken to ensure that youth are able to relate to the content being offered via these sites.

There are many different Web 2.0 applications offering different services. Understanding the difference is important in order to utilise the best resources available. Technology can be used in innovative ways to bring together various stakeholders in education to keep youth engaged in learning, but the importance of individual learning must also be acknowledged.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Masatsugu Tsuji, Mitsuhiro Kagami, and Emanuele Giovannetti (eds.) (2004), *Information Technology Policy and the Digital Divide: Lessons for Developing Countries*. Edward Elgar Cheltenham, UK.