

WEB 2.0 AND A CHANGING WORLD

On the surface things don't seem to have changed. Schools, colleges, law courts, government offices – they are all still there as before – familiar physical structures that provide stability and continuity to the fabric of daily life. Parallel to this familiar physical landscape however, out on the frontier of the Internet, much has changed. A tectonic shift is moving the locus of control in our lives away from centralised permissioned structures and towards the individual citizen. A new cohort of netizens regards all content on the Internet as 'theirs', and free: free of charge, free to download, and free to share - in flagrant breach of existing copyright regulations. Notions of identity are now complicated by the online personas that people create and we ponder the connection between online or virtual and 'real world' identity. Companies and government departments are exploiting the potential of flattened communication structures where everybody's voice can be heard across an organisation and where no one need feel excluded. Sites like *ratemyteachers.com* (1) encourage students to publicly assess their teachers in a reversal of the time honoured tradition of the end of semester report card.

These changes were underway in the first iteration of the Internet, but the advent of the Internet mark 2 (the so called Web 2.0) (2), has expedited these profound changes – due largely to the ease with which this new Read/Write web affords anyone the opportunity to create and share content with a potentially global audience. It has resulted in remarkable self-regulating communities like Wikipedia, and global communities of educators who function as Communities of Practice (3) in a process of mutual professional development among peers. This explosion of content means knowledge (or at least information) is no longer a static entity. (4) Information on any topic you care to name is being published to the web as I write. It is no longer feasible for an 'expert' to know everything about their field of expertise. Accordingly, people on the Internet now create personal learning networks (PLNs) – a network of friends/colleagues – that they rely on to remain current and up to date in their field of interest or expertise.

We now all have access to all the content on the Internet. The gatekeepers of content (editors, publishers, record companies, film studios) have been sidelined by the explosion of content made possible by social media tools. Anyone can use blogs, podcast sites, wikis, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube to publish content to the web that has not been subject to any editorial control, and *all of it* can be seen by anyone with an Internet connection.

DIGITAL LITERACY

Students currently enrolled in schools, colleges and universities will eventually progress to a world of work or study that will be characterised by a similar context – an exponential increase in the amount of information that will require engaging in networks or communities to collectively manage the information flow. Digital literacy is a phrase often used to describe the new set of literacy skills that a contemporary citizen needs to realise their potential in today's world, and it goes much deeper than being able to type, or log on and surf the Internet. A more sophisticated understanding of digital literacy includes an awareness of the notion of networks, making connections with peers, and assessing their personal *and* professional value to the individual. It (5) also encompasses the

skills needed to evaluate the flood of unedited, unmediated content that abounds on the Internet. Digitally literate citizens appreciate the fact that personal privacy is now a concern for all of us, and no longer the province of the individual alone. Der Spiegel ran a cover story earlier this year that declared “Google knows more about you than you do.” (6) As scary as this may sound, we all need to acknowledge that privacy as it was understood just 30 years ago is a thing of the past. Surveillance, Internet, and mobile technologies can track our every move, every page we browse, and everything we post on Facebook. That’s fact. I can if the mood takes me post uncompromising photographs of friends and colleagues, or in a fit of pique denigrate my ex-wife in a blog post for all the world to see.

This ability to effortlessly publish anything anytime is the root of the very real problem of cyber bullying. Consequently, everyone who uses social media sites needs to constantly re-evaluate their online behaviour. This is especially true for school children and young adults. A recent American report on the use of social media of 8-18 year olds shows that this age group are spending ever more time connecting with each other using the Internet and mobile devices. (7) Therefore, educational curricula now need to include subjects like Internet Ethics. The individual, without the imprimatur of an organisation, is now in charge of publishing content to public spaces.

VALUES

Another issue largely ignored when we examine attitudes to the Internet is the question of personal values. Mark Pegrum in his excellent recent book, *From Blogs to Bombs*, argues that discussions about the Internet and education “often reflect deep-seated social beliefs”, and that technology is a “battlefield on which contests over different visions of society are still being fought out.” (8)

Much of the architecture of the Internet has evolved through a process of openness and collaboration that reflects the values of those who prefer to place the individual at the locus of control, and who assume that individuals working together without the presence of an overarching controlling authority will naturally drift to working for the common good. There are examples of wonderful achievement being realised in this fashion – Wikipedia being perhaps the most well known. Others see this uncontrolled sharing of unmediated content as a recipe for disaster, and seek to ban or heavily regulate what citizens can see – as is the case in China.

THE CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATORS

This ‘battlefield ..over different visions of society’ is played out in the methodologies educators choose to employ in classrooms. Web 2.0 is challenging traditional teaching methodologies and changing the way we *can* teach. The following table highlights some of these changes.

THE CHANGING LEARNING AGENDA		
We are seeing a shift from:		
Formal learning spaces	⇒	Informal learning spaces
Mass learning	⇒	Personalised learning
Competitive	⇒	Collaborative learning and assessment

Restricted	⇒	Creative and extended
Instruction	⇒	Personal author and innovator
Content	⇒	Knowledge and understanding
- adapted from Greg Whitby (9)		

To a significant extent the values we hold about teaching and how knowledge is acquired will dictate where we sit on the continuums above. I am not advocating a wholesale shift to the kind of teaching described in the right hand column, but if teachers are still teaching largely according to the descriptors in the left hand column, then it may be that they are not providing students with the opportunity to develop the skills they will need to participate effectively in a 21st century workforce.

OUR COLLECTIVE CHALLENGE

There is no doubt that mainstream society is now aware that something major is afoot. Stories featuring Twitter and Facebook and the like now feature several times a week in the news bulletins of the print and electronic media. Predictably these stories largely focus on engendering fear, and highlight the evils of web and mobile media such as cyber-bullying and paedophiles stalking chat rooms. There is no mention of sites like Kiva that promote micro-financing for those in need in the developing world (10) ; or the use of sites like Get Up for mobilising action for worthy social and political causes (11). This, despite the fact that many prominent politicians now use Facebook and Twitter to garner support for their policies, and that both the Queen and the Pope have YouTube channels.

Behind much of the fear evident in mainstream reporting of social networking sites is the realisation that personal privacy is under threat. It is in this domain that society at large is now aware of the tectonic shift that has occurred: traditional notions of privacy are being flaunted, and there seems to be a new breed of citizen for whom these traditional notions of privacy are meaningless. They simply give no thought to the ramifications of posting uncompromising photographs and details of themselves and others to public spaces. Nor are they aware of the third parties siphoning off the data in Facebook and Twitter for marketing purposes, or the existence of software that can track your browser history for on-selling to parties who pay for this data.

Individual privacy is now everybody's concern. Organisations need social media policies that guide (not ban) users in responsible use of these sites, and educators and parents need to have these conversations with their students and children. For society at large the conversation has already begun about the ethics of sites like Facebook having default privacy settings that are in fact very public.

Jonathan Zittrain has warned that the current liberating and generative potential (12) of the Internet is in danger of being thwarted. (13) We face a huge decision between supporting an open system that stimulates innovation and creativity (the status quo), and a more closed system that focuses on security and control, but which may stifle innovation and creativity. Striking a balance between these two approaches should guarantee a safe Internet that is capable of withstanding attacks on its technical infrastructure, and provide an environment where everyone will still have a platform to

speak, write, create and collaborate. Ensuring that people feel personally safe and free from being harmed by those who will use the Internet for ill, is I believe not just the province of the courts and the legal system, but the collective responsibility of us all to ensure that we are sociologically ready to navigate an Internet without gatekeepers.

Michael Coghlan

June, 2010

References:

- 1) "ratemyteachers.com." *ratemyteachers.com*. N.p., 2010. Web. 28 Jun 2010. <http://www.ratemyteachers.com/>
- 2) "Web 2.0." *Wikipedia*. 2010. Web. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0
- 3) Community of Practice. *Wikipedia*. Retrieved (2010, April 29) from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_of_practice - for more on the origin and nature of Communities of Practice
- 4) Coghlan, M. (2008, March). *Where is the 'm' in interactivity, feedback and assessment?*. Retrieved from <http://wirelessready.nucba.ac.ip/Coghlan2008.pdf> - for more on the notion of 'the mobility of knowledge.'
- 5) Stevens, V. (2006). Revisiting multiliteracies in collaborative learning environments: impact on teacher professional development. *TESL - EJ*, 10(2), Retrieved from <http://www.test-ej.org/ej38/int.html> - for more on Digital Literacy and the expanded notion of multiliteracies.
- 6) Wie viel darf google wissen? (2010). *Der Spiegel*, 2, 58.
- 7) A Kaiser Family Foundation Study, (2010, January). *Generation m2: media in the lives of 8 – 18 year olds*. Retrieved from <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/8010.pdf>
- 8) Pegrum, M. (2009). *From Blogs to bombs*. Perth: UWA. <http://e-language.wikispaces.com/mr2>
- 9) Whitby, G. (2008, July). *Evangelisation and ICT*. Retrieved from <http://www.gbwhitby.parra.catholic.edu.au/resources/evangelisation-and-ict-keynote.pdf>
- 10) "Kiva - loans that change lives." *Kiva*. N.p., 2010. Web. 28 Jun 2010. <http://www.kiva.org/>
- 11) "Get Up! - Action for Australia." *Get Up!*. Independent, 2010. Web. 28 Jun 2010. <http://www.getup.org.au/>
- 12) Zittrain, Jonathan, The Generative Internet. *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 119, p. 1974, May 2006; *Oxford Legal Studies Research Paper No. 28/2006*; *Berkman Center Research Publication No. 2006/1*. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=847124>

- 13) Zittrain, Jonathan. *The Future of the Internet and how to stop it*. New Haven, United States: Yale University Press, 2008. Print. <http://futureoftheinternet.org/>