

WILL RICHARDSON

LOCKED IN AN IRRELEVANT SYSTEM?

NETWORK BUILDING AND THE NEW LITERACY

A RECENT ARTICLE IN THE *WALL STREET JOURNAL* PAINTS an amazing picture of a new world of technology that is already upon us. It seems that IBM, still one of the largest and most respected companies in the world, has embraced a whole slew of new social Web applications in a big, big way. The company hosts over 26,000 weblogs that are published by employees, has created over 20,000 wiki spaces for internal collaboration, and has programmed its own social bookmarking system (a la delicious.com) to collect and share all of the relevant and interesting resources that people in the company find. And if that's not enough, the article notes that over 400,000 full and part-time employees at IBM participate in "Blue Pages", an internal social networking site akin to MySpace, on a regular basis.

In short, Big Blue is now IBM 2.0.

Contrast that to most educational institutions in North America, and the differences are stark. In most schools, blogs are banned, wikis are scorned and social networks are taboo. And while some classrooms and teachers have begun to dabble in the uses of Web 2.0 (or Read/Write Web) tools, it's almost impossible to find systemic implementations for students *and* their teachers that compares to the portrait above.

For that reason, and a variety of others, I believe this is an incredibly challenging moment to be an educator. As it stands, most of us are locked in a system that prepares students for a world that has long since passed instead of a future that is already here. And while the world continues to change rapidly around us, our ability to react to those changes is stymied by age old beliefs about what education should be, increasingly irrelevant expectations and mandatory assessments, and our own lack of understanding as to how these tools and these technologies fundamentally change the way we learn.

In this world, we can learn in spaces and places that look, feel and act nothing like our traditional classrooms – places where we interact with people who are as passionate as we are (if not more) about whatever it is we want to learn; places where learning is the focus, not tasks, not assignments, not grades; places where we form communities and relationships in deeply meaningful ways, even though we may never meet other members face to face. And the tools that we use, the blogs and wikis and RSS feeds, are not only ways to make our thoughts and ideas transparent to the world and to collaborate freely with others. They are the tools of network building, which for all intents and purposes, is the learning literacy of the 21st Century.

The connections that this "new" Web provides can be powerful on many different levels, and – besides business – many of our traditional institutions are feeling the transformative effects. Take journalism and media as one example. Anyone with a cell phone camera can now begin to



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report on the events of the world well before the traditional journalist even knows what has occurred. And the music industry is going through a huge period of disruption as the file sharing capabilities of the Internet render once lucrative production and distribution practices irrelevant. Or, look at politics, where in the US the "YouTube Campaign" is underway. And if that's not enough to convince you, take a look at some of the "sermon sharing" sites coming online. Religion 2.0?

School models are not changing, however. Whereas learning can now occur 24/7/365, our children attend school at scheduled times and days. Whereas content can be found everywhere, our students still study from traditional texts and resources. While our students can now do meaningful work with real purposes for real audiences, too often their work simply hangs on classroom or hallway walls. And while there's no doubt they will need to be skilled at global collaboration, the classrooms in which they work are still defined by four physical walls.

The reality is, however, that our students are beginning to learn in new ways without us. If they have a connection, they know they can begin to build their own networks around whatever they are passionate about. Just look at MySpace or FanFiction.net. They know that answers to their questions are at their fingertips. Learning doesn't stop at the end of the school day or school year. It continues, on demand. And they know that there are many potential teachers out there just waiting to be found.

Our challenge as educators right now is to begin to re- envision our classrooms and our practice in order to help our students leverage these new connections and networks and, to put it bluntly, to stay relevant in their learning lives. And this requires thinking deeply about the types of skills and literacies that 21st century learners will need in order to be as successful as they can be. Certainly, basic skills like reading and writing will continue to be important, though even those literacies change when considering hypertext environments. But more and more, the skills that our students need to take with them are those that will provide a strong foundation for their own lifelong learning, ones that help them navigate a much more complex and changing landscape of information.

In a world where estimates are that our current students will have changed jobs over a dozen times by the time they reach the age of 38, is there any doubt that they will have to be self-learners in terms of the knowledge and skills they will need to succeed? Those who are more adept at quickly re-tooling, at unlearning and learning anew, will be the ones who flourish and adapt. And even more, they will need to be able to constantly find and learn to use the newest tools and technologies to support their personal learning practice.

And in that environment, our students need to be *self-starters*, people who seize the initiative and put their ideas into action. Thomas Friedman, author of the best-selling *The World is Flat*, which chronicles many of the changes that are occurring around the globe due to these technological shifts, says, "This is a world where if you are not doing it, someone else will." When the competition for ideas is global, we need to help students learn how to initiate and lead projects of their own design, and to take control of their own learning in the process.

We also need to help our students become *self-selectors* in terms of building their own personal, learning networks and preparing them for a much more collaborative, open world. We need to give them guidance and experience in answering questions like "Who can I trust?" "What defines expertise?" "Where can I find teachers?" "How do I build a learning network?" "Who can I collaborate with?" And "What does community mean?" The ways in which they are able to answer these and other crucial questions related to building learning environments online represent a new, important literacy.

While there is no question that our students will need to be able to read skillfully and write clearly, they must now also become *self-editors* in terms of how they consume the information around them. While we used to be able to hand a student a text and have a fair amount of confidence in the information it held, more and more of what we and our children read has not been edited in the traditional sense. Wikipedia, the encyclopedia that anyone can contribute to and "edit", is a great example of how the information landscape is changing. And when we read blogs and other self-published sites, we are in fact the editors who, in many cases, are able to comment back to the authors with our own corrections and additions. So we must help our students become skeptical readers and efficient editors, ones who can draw upon information from a variety of sources, vet those sources for accuracy, and synthesize the information they find for relevance and, ultimately, learning.

In this "new" world, when they do find relevant and trustworthy information, our students must be *self-organizers* who are able to effectively sort and archive it for future use. The problem is that the traditional taxonomies that have helped organize our information (namely the Dewey Decimal System) aren't nearly as effective in a digital environment. So, instead of taxonomies, we must develop our own "folksonomies" which we use to keep track of the content we find. Folksonomies are characterized by tags or keywords that we assign to each photo or article or website as we save it. And when we do save it, we save it to



various online content repositories like Flickr for photos or YouTube for video so that other people who are interested or passionate about that topic might be able to find it for themselves. And with the wide variety of technologies available to support that process, we must be adept at creating our own, personalized toolboxes that can best support our efforts.

In addition, our students will need to be *self-publishers* as they begin to use the content they create to grow their own personal learning networks. By sharing their ideas in blogs, their bookmarks in Del.icio.us, and the other content they create on wiki or multimedia sites, the Web allows them to build powerful online portfolios of work. And more importantly, that published work makes them “findable” by other potential teachers or collaborators. So our students must understand the basic tools of publishing and the ethics that go along with them, and they must learn the basic skills of communicating clearly.

At the same time, they must become *self-protectors* in order to keep themselves safe from the perils of the Internet. Unfortunately, there are predators “out there”, and, ultimately, some of our students will put themselves at risk. So we must make sure that they are aware of those dangers, and that they have the skills to deal with those dangers should they appear. To simply block “problem” sites like MySpace and Wikipedia, for example, does nothing to prepare them for the realities they will face when they leave us.

Finally, we have to assist our students to be *self-regulators* and to seek balance in their uses of technology. We will soon live in a world that is ubiquitously connected, and the pressures to stay online will only grow. It’s important that we help our students understand the benefits of powering down their connections as well.

Navigating this very different learning landscape requires us to rethink much of what we currently ask of our students. And, it requires that we rethink our curriculum in systemic ways. Incorporating these ideas and literacies must begin from the earliest grades. It must simply become a part of the way we do business in our schools. And, it requires that we, as educators, be able to model effective learning and network building for our students at every turn. Our children must see us continually learning, editing, organizing, publishing and understanding the value of all of that in our own practice. If we don’t appreciate these changes and these possibilities in our own learning, it will be difficult for us to understand the shifting pedagogies that are required to leverage their potentials for our students.

EN BREF La majorité d’entre nous sommes enfermés dans un système qui prépare les étudiants pour un monde depuis longtemps dépassé, plutôt que pour un avenir déjà présent. Qui plus est, bien que le monde continue de changer rapidement autour de nous, notre capacité d’y réagir est paralysée par des convictions désuètes au sujet de la nature de l’éducation, par des attentes de moins en moins pertinentes et par des évaluations automatiques, de même que par notre propre incompréhension de la façon dont ces outils et technologies transforment fondamentalement notre façon d’apprendre. En tant qu’éducateurs, nous devons maintenant relever le défi de formuler une nouvelle vision de nos classes et de notre pédagogie afin d’aider nos élèves à tirer parti de ces nouveaux réseaux et connexions et, disons-le clairement, à faire des apprentissages vraiment pertinents.

The list of reasons that we can cite for not making these changes is long, and many of the reasons are legitimate. Many of our schools still do not have the infrastructure to provide regular Web access to our students, and many of our children still don’t have access from home. Ultimately, we must answer to the measures of standardized tests, and therefore we choose to stick to a curriculum that is itself already tested. It’s not uncommon for principals and superintendents to have little or no experience with these technologies and therefore be hesitant to support a teacher’s use of them in the classroom. In many cases, parents have been led to fear social technologies instead of embrace them. Finally, our own time to learn is limited.

But at the end of the day, I think it’s incumbent upon us to make the time, however possible, to rethink our own learning practice as it relates to the future of our students. There is little doubt at this point that the work they do will be in digital formats and require an understanding of hypertext, that they will be required to collaborate in deeply meaningful ways, that they will have to be able to find relevant information from personally vetted resources, and that they will depend on sophisticated networks of learners and teachers to inform much of what they do. And we need to understand that for ourselves as well. |

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