Web 2.0 Tools Can Promote Literacy and Global Awareness

Web 2.0 tools can foster literacy skills, global awareness, and communication among elementary schools and students.

by Silvia Rosenthal Tolisano

Literacy today does not have the same meaning it did a few years ago. Twenty-first century literacy entails a new set of skills that educators and schools are struggling to define and adjust to in order to prepare students for the future. Media, which once was confined to print, evolved to include radio and television in the middle of the last century, making it possible to deliver content to the masses. The onset of the Internet in the last decade of the 20th century made it possible for individuals with technical skills to publish Web sites and audio content that could reach a worldwide audience. Web 2.0 tools started appearing during the past few years and have further blurred the boundaries of consumers and producers of media, making delivery of information across national borders and continents easy and quick.

Web 2.0 represents the shift from merely consuming to producing information on the Web. The tools, which are inexpensive and are available to anyone with Internet access, allow anyone to create and be a part of a worldwide learning community that connects, communicates, collaborates, and shares information. Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, wikis, and social networking and bookmarking sites encourage and support the notion of collective knowledge and are influencing the way 21st century literacy is defined.

Web 2.0 Literacy Skills

Twenty-first century literacy skills include the ability to use different kinds of media to collaborate and share information with others near and far. In order to develop these skills, today’s administrators and educators must embrace Web 2.0 tools for their own productivity and professional development.

A major component of Web 2.0 technology is the ability to access and work with anyone anywhere in the world, creating possibilities for learning opportunities that never existed before. For example, requiring students to use a word processor as a tool for typing a traditional book report no longer constitutes integrating technology into teaching. Students are not learning anything different about the book or the writing process by replacing the traditional writing tool with a digital one. Web 2.0 tools allow teachers to literally take the curriculum off the page by creating learning opportunities for students that simply could not exist without them. For example, a writing teacher can assign students to prepare a book report that will be edited by another student living in another part of the world or assign students to record their book reviews in audio form so that English as a Second Language learners can download them and listen to them on their iPods.

Web 2.0 tools provide authentic learning opportunities that translate into challenged, engaged, and invested learners. In addition to enhancing literacy skills, Web 2.0 technology can encourage global awareness and communication. Following are two tools that San Jose Episcopal Day School in Jacksonville, Florida, uses to promote collaboration and global studies.

VoiceThread

San Jose Episcopal Day School uses VoiceThread, a free tool that is rated highly among teachers and students, to integrate its global studies curriculum. VoiceThread allows creators to upload images, videos, or documents and to invite visitors to leave audio or text comments on individual slides. Jose’s Journey to Egypt is a schoolwide VoiceThread project that uses about 50 photos taken during a teacher’s trip to Egypt. We invited all elementary grade levels to participate in creating a snapshot of our learning after a yearlong Egypt study. Each student added one comment about what he or she learned about Egypt. We pulled together our collective knowledge across grade levels on a subject and demonstrated the power of collaborating with a learning community.
**What Could it Mean?** is a VoiceThread that was created to make students more globally aware. This VoiceThread is a collection of worldwide images showing unique traditions, customs, distinctive perspectives, routines, habits, and country-specific practices. Teachers can invite teachers from any part of the world to participate with their students by leaving a comment behind on these images with their interpretation of “what it could mean.” The differences in cultural backgrounds emerge as more voices are added from students of different ages and countries, providing distinct perceptions and perspectives of images. This tool allows classrooms around the world to share their own unique cultures through digital images. Students learn and understand why someone from a different country might not understand and interpret common practices in the same way. This VoiceThread is an open-ended story, allowing for more images to be added and more students’ voices to be heard.

**Blogs**

Blogs have also been instrumental in aiding collaboration and communication across subject areas, grade levels, and country borders. A blog is a Web log or online journal. Our teachers have embraced this tool to communicate with students and families between classroom and home. Parents are allowed to easily share text, photos, videos, and audio content produced in the classroom with the click of a button. Kindergarten teachers have integrated writing into the classroom by instituting a weekly blogger. Each student has the opportunity to become a published author and showcase writing skills on the class’s blog.

Our **Teddy Bears around the World blog** is another example of how Web 2.0 tools have fostered global awareness, collaboration, and communication among elementary schools and students. Teddy bears from around the world have been invited to share adventures and daily activities from their own unique perspectives. The teddy bears are manipulated by elementary students and communicate with one another via a central blog, allowing a conversation and a connection between students worldwide. This blog is also an open-ended project as teddy bears from the United States, Canada, United Arab Emirates, Australia, New Zealand, England, Spain, Peru, Argentina, Guatemala, and Kuwait join the global conversation.

What can administrators do to facilitate integration of Web 2.0 tools in their schools? A quick survey from my personal learning network on Twitter (social messaging utility for staying connected in real-time) revealed that the recommendations are quite simple:

- Model these tools for your own productivity and communication within your school community. Through demonstration, your teachers will begin to use Web 2.0 to connect and communicate with colleagues and experts around the world.
- Encourage your teachers to use the tools by rewarding early adopters.
- Require your teachers to integrate Web 2.0 tools into their teaching.
- Support your teachers in using Web 2.0 tools by making sure no outdated or fearful policies are blocking access.

Web 2.0 tools are just like any other vehicle to extend and enrich student learning. They enhance creativity and allow students to connect to content in ways never thought possible.

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**On the Same Page**

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. How can Web 2.0 applications enhance our existing curriculum? Which subjects would most benefit from Web 2.0 collaboration?
2. Where can we find information about integrating Web 2.0 applications into our teaching?
3. Do we have the technological infrastructure to support Web 2.0 applications? If not, how do we assess our needs?

4. What are some other Web 2.0 tools that you have used outside of school, and how can they be adapted to student learning?

5. How can we use Web 2.0 technology to enhance staff collaboration?