The Internet Can Increase Learning

Has Technology Increased Learning? , 2009

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Though the Internet has revolutionized commerce, media, and business, its potential as a learning tool has yet to be embraced in education. Students can use blogs to break down the barriers of traditional publishing and facilitate discussions with teachers, classmates, and wide audiences. Podcasts are also gaining in popularity in schools—it is both a source of educational digital content and a hands-on activity when students produce their own podcasts. Photosharing sites, such as Flickr, are virtual libraries of images students can use for presentations as well as a platform for them to share their photographs, and students can use YouTube to air self-produced video clips. These Web tools and services enhance education and empower students.

Much has been written on Read/WriteWeb (and elsewhere) about the effect that web technologies are having on commerce, media, and business in general. But outside of the 'edublogosphere', there's been little coverage of the impact it is having on education. Teachers are starting to explore the potential of blogs, media-sharing services and other social software—which, although not designed specifically for e-learning, can be used to empower students and create exciting new learning opportunities.

As I wrote in The Guardian [in 2005]: "Like the web itself, the early promise of e-learning—that of empowerment—has not been fully realized. The experience of e-learning for many has been no more than a hand-out published online, coupled with a simple multiple-choice quiz. Hardly inspiring, let alone empowering. But by using these new web services, e-learning has the potential to become far more personal, social and flexible."

Blogging is increasingly finding a home in education.

The traditional approach to e-learning has been to employ the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), software that is often cumbersome and expensive—and which tends to be structured around courses, timetables, and testing. That is an approach that is too often driven by the needs of the institution rather than the individual learner. In contrast, e-learning 2.0 (as coined by [information technology expert] Stephen Downes) takes a 'small pieces, loosely joined' approach that combines the use of discrete but complementary tools and web services—such as blogs, wikis, and other social software—to support the creation of ad-hoc learning communities.

Blogging

Blogging is increasingly finding a home in education (both in school and university), as not only does the software remove the technical barriers to writing and publishing online—but the 'journal' format encourages students to keep a record of their thinking over time. Blogs also of course facilitate critical feedback, by letting readers add comments—which could be from teachers, peers or a wider audience.
Students use of blogs [is] far ranging. A single authored blog can be used to provide a personal space online, to pose questions, publish work in progress, and link to and comment on other web sources. However a blog needn't be limited to a single author—it can mix different kinds of voices, including fellow students, teachers and mentors, or subject specialists. Edu-blogging pioneer Will Richardson (author of a book entitled Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms) used the blog software Manila to enable his English literature students to publish a readers guide to the book The Secret Life of Bees. Richardson asked the book's author, Sue Monk Kidd, if she would participate by answering questions and commenting on what the students had written—to which she agreed. The result was a truly democratic learning space.

More Edu-blogging Examples

Under the guidance of [teacher and social networking expert] Ewan McIntosh, Musselburgh Grammar School in Scotland has, for the second year running, published a travel blog of the school's annual trip to Paris and Normandy (using TypePad's hosted blogging service). Additionally, the student council publishes a blog to keep the school's community informed and involved on various issues. McIntosh has also pioneered the use of Podcasting in education (more below), and last year, the school's MGS Podcast was short-listed for a New Statesman New Media award.

School children in the UK are proof that you're never too young to start edu-blogging. Inspired by their teacher John Mills, the seven year-old students at West Blatchington School in Hove blog fanatically. The school even holds blogging assemblies, as I found out when I had the privilege of meeting the next generation of bloggers for a film I presented [in 2005] for Teacher's TV.

Teachers who are subject specialists are also using blogs to provide up-to-date information and commentary on their subject areas, as well as posting questions and assignments and linking to relevant news stories and websites. Media studies teacher Pete Fraser runs one such blog (using Blogger) for his students at Long Road sixth-form college, in Cambridge, UK.

Inevitably, educationalists are also using blogs to share their innovative use of web 2.0 in education—and, in turn, spread good practice. Prominent UK edu-bloggers that I'm subscribed to (aside from those already mentioned) include Josie Fraser, Miles Berry, Peter Ford and Terry Freedman.

Podcasting

Podcasting has become a popular technology in education, in part because it provides a way of pushing educational content to learners. For example, Stanford University has teamed up with Apple to create the Stanford iTunes University—which provides a range of digital content (some closed and some publicly accessible) that students can subscribe to using Apple's iTunes software.

However, student-produced podcasts are where it's at when it comes to educational podcasting. Swap 'user-generated content' for 'learner-generated content' and you soon get the picture. Apple, with its strong presence in the education market, has been quick to recognize the learning potential of student podcasting. Apple is heavily marketing its iPod and associated content creation tools (iMovie, GarageBand, and iTunes) to the education sector. The podcasting section of iTunes even has a category dedicated to education.
For a great example of a student-produced podcast, check out the MGS Podcast which I wrote about for The Guardian. As with blogging, podcasting provides students with a sense of audience—and they are highly motivated to podcast because the skills required seem 'relevant' to today's world.

Media Sharing

The photo-sharing site Flickr is also finding use within education—as it provides, a valuable resource for students and educators looking for images for use in presentations, learning materials or coursework. Many of the images uploaded to Flickr carry a Creative Commons license, making them particularly suitable for educational use—and the tagging of images makes it much easier to find relevant content.

Students can also use Flickr to publish their digital photography to a wider audience. And like blogging, the commenting function on Flickr allows for critical feedback. A lesser-known feature of Flickr—the ability to add hot-spot annotations to an image—also has much potential as a learning tool. Beth Harris, director of distance learning at the Fashion Institute of Technology, State University of New York, has used this feature to enable her students to annotate and discuss a series of paintings as part of an online art history course.

Pete Fraser (mentioned above) has been experimenting with the use of video-sharing site YouTube with his media studies students, as part of a course on new media. Rather than have students prepare a traditional presentation, students were asked to produce a short video on a chosen new media subject—examples included MySpace and the rise of the iPod. Videos were then published onto YouTube, where they can be viewed and commented on by classmates and the wider YouTube community.

DOPA and Social Networks

The educational potential of social software and services is huge. However, much of the work being done by educators (of which I've barely scratched the surface) is in danger of being undermined by the recently proposed Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA). This legislation [not yet enacted as of April 2008] attempts to address the moral panic over sites like MySpace and the perceived 'dangers' they pose to children, by banning the use of commercial social networking websites in US schools and libraries which receive federal IT funding. A "commercial social networking website" is defined as any web service that:

"... allows users to create web pages or profiles that provide information about themselves and are available to other users; and offers a mechanism for communication with other users, such as a forum, chat room, email, or instant messenger."

Further Readings

Books

- Williams Clyde and Andrew DeloheryUsing Technology in Education. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press,


**Periodicals**


• David Warlick. "A Day in the Life of Web 2.0: The Latest Powerful Online Tools Can Be Harnessed to

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