

Semester Without End: Keeping the Connection Open Via Web 2.0

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Introduction

Over the ages, whether we called it semester, quarter, trimester, session, term, or module – instructional units have been just that, quantifiable measures in terms of time, content, and location. Classes had a beginning, duration, and end. Most commonly, they were offered in one location. When the term of that instructional unit was met, there was a cessation of teaching and learning. Instructor and students went their own way to continue their lives and careers. Certainly, a select few students would keep in touch with their instructor or their class peers, but that was the clear exception, not the rule. In even more rare cases an instructor would maintain a newsletter or a listserv to push out occasional information to former students.

With the emergence of RSS syndicated Web 2.0 technologies, we have the means to continue to engage students after the end of the instructional term. The very nature of these technologies is to facilitate two-way communication in text, audio, and video; to interact, to engage over time and distance. Increasingly, as we integrate these technologies into our classes, we open the door to engage our students along with our former students. We are no longer bound by the classroom, by the term, by the university. With the emerging virtual world environments, we seemingly are no longer bound by the definitions and persona of this world!

The liberating aspects of Web 2.0 enable users to continue to teach, interact, and gain input from students who have completed the course alongside (virtually) those who are currently enrolled. This creates the potential for a rich learning community spanning the student and the graduated professional. It provides continuing education for those who completed the initial course; it provides the insight and perspective of professionals to those who are first encountering the course material. And, it expands the learning experience beyond the artificial boundaries of the institution.

Brief Introduction to Web 2.0

Web 1.0 was initiated with the advent of the World Wide Web in early 1990s with the release of HTML and the first Web browser, Mosaic. Remarkable for hyper linking and the display of data, text, graphics, and modest multi-media, Web 1.0 created a revolution in the sharing of information and entertainment worldwide. Rapid growth ensued for nearly a decade, populating the Web with content that was largely static and not interactive. The term Web 2.0 originated in 2004 as the industry began to rebound from the shakeout of a few years earlier. The term has come to represent a wide array of online technologies that generally have in common what Tim O'Reilly called a "gravitational core." That core includes characteristics such as services, interactive, scalable, and engaging the collective intelligence (O'Reilly, 2005).

A table of sample Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 corollaries (Table 1) was developed by Tim O'Reilly to demonstrate the differences between the technologies. While far from exhaustive, the list demonstrates well the display and hyper linking aspects of Web 1.0 compared to the interactive and participatory aspects of Web 2.0.

Table 1.*

| Web 1.0 | | Web 2.0 |
|----------------------------|-----|----------------------------|
| DoubleClick | --> | Google AdSense |
| Ofoto | --> | Flickr |
| Akamai | --> | BitTorrent |
| mp3.com | --> | Napster |
| Britannica Online | --> | Wikipedia |
| personal websites | --> | blogging |
| evite | --> | upcoming.org and EVDB |
| domain name speculation | --> | search engine optimization |
| page views | --> | cost per click |
| screen scraping | --> | web services |
| publishing | --> | participation |
| content management systems | --> | wikis |
| directories (taxonomy) | --> | tagging ("folksonomy") |
| stickiness | --> | syndication |

*(O'Reilly, 2005)

RSS and Ajax

Two key enabling technologies in Web 2.0 are RSS and Ajax. RSS – commonly called Really Simple Syndication, but variously identified as Rich Site Summary and RDF Site Summary, refers to an XML file that describes content on another site such as a podcast, blog or wiki (Wikipedia, 2007). The power of RSS is that subscribers receive update announcements without visiting the originating site to see if new content has been posted. RSS feeds are used to auto-update podcasts on iPods through iTunes software.

Ajax is an acronym for asynchronous JavaScript and xml that was coined by Jesse James Garrett in his Adaptive Path blog in 2005. (Garrett, 2005) Ajax is important in Web 2.0 applications because it enables JavaScript programs to be run on the browser's computer rather than at the server level. This saves time and enhances responsiveness, enabling Web 2.0 applications to run quickly and smoothly.

Context of Online Learning and Student Engagement

Research into effective practices in online learning encourages interaction and engagement among the students, instructor and content. (Swan 2004) It is in this interaction in which we enable students to construct knowledge and, in many cases, to practice applying that knowledge. Web 2.0 applications enable interactions at all three levels, student and instructor interaction; student and content interaction; and student and peer interaction. Many positive benefits are gained from the social, cognitive and teaching presence (Swan 2004), all of which can be facilitated by Web 2.0 applications.

A Blog Example

In the 1980s and 1990s I taught a graduate seminar in New Technologies in the Electronic Media. As is common in such seminars, students were required to critique articles and monographs, presenting their comments to the class at large. Given the emergent nature of the subject, relevant articles would be published even during the course of the semester. To efficiently push those articles out to students, a listserv was set up. As students completed the seminar and launched or continued their careers, a number continued their subscription to the list. This provided them with a relatively steady stream of reports of recent research in the field. It was one-way; students did not have permission to post to the list.

In 2001, the list was converted to a blog entitled “Techno-News.” With RSS dissemination, updates were pushed out to subscriber computers via aggregators. Comments were enabled so that students, and others, could respond to the postings. Additional blogs were added; “Online Learning Update” and “Educational Technology.” The blogs are now available to students in the Internet and American Life class that I currently teach online. Students enrolled in the class monitor the blog postings via aggregators or links included in the Blackboard class site. Former students continue to aggregate the blog and continue to post comments to the blog that are then read by students in the class and enhance the online discussions. Course materials are shared via the blog with former students (and others) beyond the end of the semester, thereby keeping the two-way connection open with those who have taken the class.

Applicability in Range of Classes

Application of these technologies is not discipline-specific. Podcasts, wikis, blogs and many of the other Web 2.0 technologies are equally useful in all courses that cover topics where there are updates, new research, on-going debates and discussions. The use of technologies to disseminate these perspectives to persons beyond those on the current class roster is true to the “gravitational core” of Web 2.0 and engages the collective intelligence of students, former students, and potentially others. The opportunity also exists to share such communications among related classes at the same, or different, institutions and even across disciplines. Expanding the learning community in this way enhances the learning experience, enables contacts and promotes collaborations.

An Avatar Vision

Virtual world environments such as Second Life are opening the potential for even richer collaborations within the extended learning community. The potential exists for students at various institutions to interact with former students via avatars in virtual worlds. “In world” sessions in the future may provide yet another robust opportunity for exchanges. The rich multi-media environment in Second Life provides opportunities for chats, instant messages, shared objects and more. Extended learning communities may thrive in such an environment.

Conclusions

In the Web 2.0 era, we are only now beginning to realize the transformative opportunities for changes that can vastly expand the learning community. With the interactive technologies that span location and time, we can re-conceptualize the learning term. We have the opportunity to extend the learning experience to encompass students, former students, professionals, and others with interests in the discipline of study.

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Biographical Sketch

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