

Skills 2.0

Web 2.0 gives learning professionals an aptitude adjustment

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Also known as the two-way Web, you could say that Web 2.0 is the Web being used as it was originally intended - for sharing and collaborating. Web 2.0 tools are based on the concept of the Internet as platform and include blogs, wikis, podcasts, micro-blogging, social networks and a raft of new implements every week. For this discussion, let's say that Web 2.0 is the growing set of tools and processes that allows anyone to easily create digital content and collaborate with others without any special programming skills.

Professionals and communities

The Web is changing our relationships with hierarchies, institutions, accreditation, and expertise. We can bypass these structures to find what we want and connect with others. For example, expertise is being eroded in many fields. Medical doctors are confronted daily by patients who have researched a disease, using reputable sources, in greater depth than the doctor has time to do. Patients are becoming co-managers of their health.

It is getting difficult for anyone to be an expert other than in a very narrow field for a short period of time. Bloggers can quickly get the scoop on professional journalists. As knowledge workers, we are like actors - only as good as our last performance. For a fleeting time, we may be viewed as experts, but for not much longer. This erosion in perceived and conferred expertise means that professionals have to become learners themselves and follow the flow of the ever-expanding bodies of knowledge related to their fields.

A couple of comments from David Williamson Shaffer, author of *How computer games help children learn* (a book not really about children), are pertinent to the issue of professionalism. He defines a professional as, "anyone who does work that cannot be standardized easily and who continuously welcomes challenges at the cutting edge of his or her expertise."

Given the rapidly changing tools of Web 2.0, coupled with advances in the neurosciences, much of the work in the learning field is not easily standardized. At least the valuable stuff, which clients and employers are willing to pay for, fits that description. Shaffer also talks about creativity, a quality that is necessary in non-standardized work, saying "Creativity is a conversation - a tension - between individuals working on individual problems and the professional communities they belong to."

That conversation is an essential part of being a learning professional today. One person cannot know everything, but you can add to, as well as benefit from, the knowledge of others by engaging in various online conversations. Web 2.0 lets anyone join in the professional conversation and conversely, may isolate those who do not.

Professionals immersed in communities of practice, or those continuously pushing their informal learning opportunities, may have a larger zone of proximal development (the gap between a learner's current development level and the learner's potential level of development). They are more open to learning and to expanding their knowledge. For example, I have had a huge growth in my professional network since I started blogging. These professional conversations may not be possible off-line, especially if you live outside a major urban centre.

Today, active involvement in informal learning, particularly through web-based communities, is key to remaining professional and creative in a field. Being a learning professional in a Web 2.0 world is becoming more about your network than your current knowledge.

Open Source

Look at the advancements that community-developed open source software has made in the past few years. We are beginning to see the tide turn away from proprietary software, despite the current market success of a few large vendors. There is now a general acceptance of open source software such as Firefox and even Open Source such as Wikipedia, as viable options. We are also witnessing the subversion of institutional software systems via quick and dirty web applications (free IP telephony, free blogs, tagging as our own semantic web, and a multitude of social networks) that can be set up in minutes.

It's not just open source that will change our institutions but rather the realization that individuals now own the means of knowledge production and the tools to share it. In a knowledge economy, the individual is the knowledge creator and relationships are the currency. It's getting easier to set up alternative systems if you know who to connect with and get things done.

Democracy is subversive and so is Web 2.0. In an interconnected global society, every learner brings his own network to an engagement. Learners no longer have to integrate into an educational system; if they choose to, they can connect their networks to it. How relevant then is any educational system that does not allow learners to connect their personal, professional or vocational networks to the system?

Enabling learning is no longer about just disseminating good content, if it ever was. Enabling learning is about being a learner yourself, sharing your knowledge and enthusiasm and then taking a back seat. In a flattened learning system there are fewer experts and more fellow learners on paths that may cross. With practice, one can become a guide who has already walked a path. As fields of practice and bodies of knowledge expand, a challenge for learning professionals will be to change their toolsets from prescriptive to supportive.

Tools

Fields of knowledge are expanding, new tools are constantly being introduced and 1 billion people are connected via the Internet. However blogging currently stands out as nearly ubiquitous, especially for personal professional development. Varieties of blogs include text, video, audio, but all blogs are simple, give individuals voice, and enable conversation to flow.

Think of a blog as a professional journal, where you record your thoughts and ask questions of your peers. Each blog post has a unique identifier, called a permalink, which can be referenced by others. Blog posts do not need to be perfect essays. Blog posts can help make sense of your learning process. Comments can be made on another person's blog, or you can discuss it on your blog and then connect with a link to the other one. This creates a network of the conversations around an issue or topic.

Skills

With a blog as home base, there are certain skills that are must-haves for learning professionals.

Attitude: Accepting that we will never know everything, but that others may be able to help, is the first step in becoming a learning professional. This is an acceptance of a world in flux and that knowledge is neither constant nor fixed.

Instead of trying to know everything in our field, we can concentrate on knowing who to connect with. The network becomes all-important. That means an attitude of openness and collaboration - joining others on a journey of understanding. Giving up control would be a first step on this journey.

Even reading on the web is quite different from print. Digitally, we have opportunities to engage the writers and make our thoughts known, whether through comments or linking to the original article from our blog.

Having a blog, a permanent presence on the Web, becomes the jumping off point for deeper professional discussions. Producing a blog also opens a person up to criticism, so once again, an open attitude to learning is essential.

Learning: Learning professionals can no longer rest on their past accomplishments while the field changes and grows. They should be testing Web 2.0 tools so that they can develop optimal processes to support their organizations. If learning professionals are not setting the example of learning online, who is?

The example of putting your own learning process out in public or your intranet shows that you are willing to learn from others. As new tools are introduced, learning professionals should be early adopters, leading the way in testing them out. We are in an age of “walking the talk”.

Collaboration: Through sharing and exposing their work on the Web, learning professionals can connect to communities of practice and get informal peer review. There is no way to stay current with the technology, the neuroscience or the pedagogy all by ourselves.

With blogs and other collaboration methods, each of us can become a participatory node in various communities of practice. The whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts, and knowing who to call becomes more important than having the right answer. But we are all humans and we relate on a human level. That means that we first have to get to know others and develop a level of trust before real sharing can happen. Collaboration is a two-way street and a blog can get you moving.

Connect, exchange, contribute

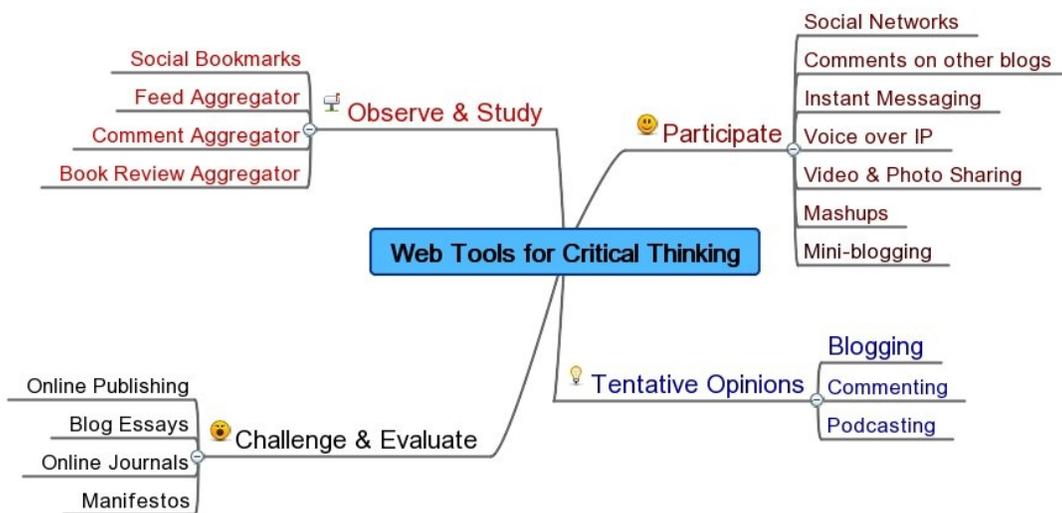
In many workplaces today, anyone can connect with almost everyone. Each of us can be a contributor to the network. Who you know becomes as important as what you know. Conversations help people make meaning and the quality of our conversations is affected by the quality of our networks.

If we limit our conversations to only those in the same office, we’re missing out. People with larger and more diverse networks have an advantage as learning professionals and in dealing with change. This constant flow of sense-making through conversations in our networked workplace makes the idea of learning as a fixed event in a specific place look rather obsolete.

Sidebar: Critical Thinking

A part of critical thinking is the questioning of underlying assumptions, including our own. There are several Web 2.0 tools that can help develop critical thinking in the four areas¹ of:

1. observing and studying our fields;
2. participating in professional communities;
3. building tentative opinions; and
4. challenging and evaluating ideas.



¹ Derived from Dave Pollard at blogs.salon.com/0002007

Sidebar: Flow²

Imagine walking into a cocktail party that has been going on for a few hours and jumping into the conversation. Blogs are like that. They flow along and different people join in the conversation from time to time. One can monitor dozens of blogs, not necessarily reading each post. You can then have a general idea of what's flowing by, so that it's easy to join the conversation when something interesting pops up.

To use blogs for learning effectively, you have to jump in and go with the flow for a while. Understanding what is behind the writing, as well as the conversations around each post, provides the necessary context. Learning with blogs isn't just about finding a useful fact here or there, but requires an engagement with multiple stories that flow by, sometimes mixing and other times diverging. Following these flows is an acquired skill. It's a meta-learning skill for the Internet age that is worth developing. Jumping in is the first step.

² This sidebar not in published in article