

Education 2.0

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Web 2.0 software is important in the Internet world because it helps people create content, share it, and collaborate to individualize and enrich their online experiences. In this paper, I will focus on a parallel concept that is much more important to public education, to democracy and to our children: Education 2.0.

What is Education 2.0?

Education 2.0 is education that is built around people actively creating their learning experiences, sharing information and collaborating to individualize and enrich their learning experiences. Why is Education 2.0 important? Because when people learn to meet their unique interests through creating, sharing and collaborating, they will later create, share and collaborate to produce higher quality results in their work, and in their civic life.

The education system that I attended was designed to prepare me for the world I grew up in during the 1960's and 70's. I was supposed to absorb information, become an expert at something, and then use the information I had learned to do something useful. That's what most of my friends did as well. If they were good at math, they became engineers or accountants and took jobs in those fields. If they wrote well, they majored in English or history, and became lawyers or teachers. If they weren't into school, they got a job in a local automotive plant.

Then, something happened to each of them. It turned out that Mike didn't like accounting, and now he is an industrial process consultant. Mechanical parts were replaced by electronics, so Debbie needed to retrain in order to keep designing consumer products. Scott's auto company lost market share to imports, so he couldn't make \$35 per hour with free health care any more. The life they had prepared for had changed.

We live in a very different world than when my generation was in school. Information is broadly available, and basically free. No more days in the library, or subscriptions to specialized publications to stay on the leading edge; just Google it. Communications are ubiquitous, and very low cost. Remember when news came from newspapers and long distance calls were expensive? And, remember when companies filled buildings in their hometowns with people who would create their products? Now, those jobs can be performed anywhere.

The jobs are different too. Rather than doing one thing for a long time using one's hard-earned knowledge, many jobs today are about collecting, sharing and using that freely available information to serve your customer. A typical career now includes multiple jobs in multiple industries, using some core skills based on reading, math and thinking, to figure out and perform different tasks in different contexts, often in different countries.

The result is that participants in today's job market need a very different set of skills than the employees of twenty or thirty years ago. Rather than accumulating a body of knowledge and applying it in consistent ways, employees and contractors today need the skills of acquiring information and using it for problem solving in collaboration with colleagues in the company, and around the world. They are expected to acquire new skills and information, and to apply them with measureable results under deadline. They are expected to use technology in the course of their jobs, often training themselves while using their computer applications to do meaningful work.

Being able to follow instructions, to absorb information, and to apply it in predictable ways is not nearly enough to succeed today. Both working adults and their children need a different type of education to perform today's jobs, and the entirely different jobs coming in the future. They need Education 2.0 where they learn to find information, gauge it's value, share it with others on their team, solve problems together, produce new content, convince others of the value of that new content, and even to teach others how they did it. All of those tasks will be carried out in virtual workspaces that prepare students for the computer-supported workplaces they will enter.

Now, the key question: where do we find Education 2.0? Interestingly, you can find it today in the training departments of most companies. It is already normal for employees to take online courses, to learn together, to apply what they learn during the course of their daily jobs, and to teach others even as they learn. Corporations use sophisticated virtual learning environments to train their employees. In many cases, face-to-face classes aren't even available any more. And, corporations reward their employees for acquiring new skills through bonuses, promotions and the promise of more interesting work.

Certain elements of today's formal education system provide Education 2.0 – mostly in the less prestigious levels and programs. Students can often gain technical certifications in online courses, and nursing students typically work together to learn difficult skills and apply what they learn in the classroom during their clinical internships. In-service teachers can take online courses together to learn new skills, such as the groups of elementary school teachers learning to teach for understanding from WIDE World, the outreach arm of the Harvard University Graduate School of Education.

Yet, most of the education community still provides traditional reading, lecture and test-based education. I am not going to dwell on the reasons except to say there are many disincentives for change, including those created by the tenure system, accreditation organizations, simplistic magazine rankings of schools, and government regulation.

In spite of those disincentives for change and many more, I predict that Education 2.0 will be the norm in higher education within 10 years. Why? Because employers will hire the graduates of Education 2.0 over those with traditional skill sets, and students will demand Education 2.0 to be sure of getting hired.

K-12 education will take longer to make the change because, as a government-operated system, it can survive the flight of students to home schooling, virtual schools, private schools and other alternatives. Yet, under the twin pressures of budget limitations and improved expectations, alternatives are emerging rapidly such as charter schools in the US, academies in England and tutoring schools in China.

In the U.S., twice as many children learn at home as did 10 years ago. Many of these students participate in online courses and collaborate over social networks. Many high school dropouts now participate in online high schools and GED courses, succeeding where they failed before. Community colleges and for-profit colleges provide Education 2.0 for students who could not complete high school.

Some traditional K-12 schools are taking the Education 2.0 plunge, adopting virtual learning environments and offering project-based learning, individualized instruction, collaborative learning, experimental learning and other elements of Education 2.0. They see the need to educate their students to participate in the modern world, and as good educators, they are overcoming the disincentives and making changes to help their students. The Illinois Science and Math Academy is a 25-year-old example that consistently takes young adults from low performance backgrounds and helps them become high performance college-bound students.

Still, Education 2.0 is not a given. Well-meaning government officials around the world will try to impose standards, curricula and tests to make sure that their students learn the “right” things. Parents will continue to lobby for their children to receive an education similar to the one that they experienced. Educators will continue to teach the way they did last year because that’s what they were trained to do.

Yet, I see Education 2.0 happening because learners try to learn in ways that are relevant to the world they live in now and they will source their education from those who deliver the experience they seek. I see our society benefitting from a population with better learning skills, better communication skills, better collaboration skills and better teaching skills. I feel lucky to be participating in a change which many forecasted in the 1960’s and 70’s when I was a student, and which has been enabled by the technologies, economics and politics of the new millennia. Education 2.0 is coming – how will you participate?