

By Daniel Light

Principals for Web 2.0 Success

10 Ways to Build Vibrant Learning Communities with the Read/Write Web

By now, many educators agree that web 2.0 tools have the potential to transform aspects of learning and teaching. As I wrote in “Do Web 2.0 Right” (*L&L*, February 2011, pages 11–15), teachers who use social media effectively have turned their classrooms into entirely new learning spaces.

But how can a principal make a school web 2.0 friendly in the first place? Is there a set of proven methods that encourage teachers to learn these tools? Are some districts more likely to provide this kind of environment than others?

Over the past decade, Intel has provided the Center for Children & Technology with funding to conduct numerous studies about how best to help educators integrate technology into their teaching. In a recent two-year investigation into how web 2.0 tools and social-networking technologies are supporting learning and teaching, we discovered several ways principals and technology leaders can make the learning curve both easier and smoother. Although some of these suggestions may sound familiar, many now have a web 2.0 twist. Here are the top 10.

1 Invest in a virtual learning environment (VLE). A VLE is a software platform that provides a password-protected virtual classroom. Teachers can manage classroom activities and materials or upload documents and files to this space.

All of the most innovative teachers we visited were working within a VLE. These VLEs served as online “home-rooms,” functioning the way a web portal might have functioned in the past—as the starting place for most of the online activity connected to a particular class and as a virtual meeting and discussion space.

Many options are available, from existing platforms, such as Blackboard, Edmodo, and Schoology, to district-created Moodle or Drupal sites. Find one that best meets your school’s needs and budget.

2 Talk up the fact that web 2.0 can be incredibly easy to use. Web 2.0 tools make lessons more engaging, and teachers don’t have to be technology experts to use them. We have been promoting educational technology for more than 10 years, and earlier generations of tech tools took more time than we ever wanted to admit to learn, teach, and use. This often emerged in our findings as one of the leading barriers to effective and sustained use of technology in classrooms. But veteran techies and newbies alike talk about how easy it is to learn many new web apps.

In our research, teachers told us there were very few, if any, complicated features to learn, and none of them felt they had to be programmers to take the tools as far as they wanted.

3 Use web 2.0 tools for professional development and community building. The best way to lead by example

is to create and participate in a school-wide professional learning community. Web 2.0 tools are really about promoting communication—not just disseminating information—so they can be very effective for facilitating conversations that strengthen the educational community. Participants can put up discussion questions, ask questions of their peers, or share successes. A few schools we visited used tools such as Ning, Diigo, Yammer, and the social networking features found within their VLEs in addition to their professional development and professional community-building activities.

The activities we observed were different from the online PD courses and served as less formal instances of support. For example, one principal hosted an online reading group using a blog. Every semester, teachers chose a book that was relevant to their teaching to discuss online by responding to guiding questions on the blog. The experience strengthened their professional community and created ways for teachers to support one another by sharing lesson ideas or intervention strategies.

Principals can invite teachers to use these tools to reflect on their own practice, discuss strategies and interventions, and share lessons and ideas. When you use web 2.0 tools, you encourage your teachers to use them as well. Send e-newsletters, set up a space for teachers to collaborate online, or start contests to see which class blog gets the most postings.

4 **Show your support via social media as well as the old-fashioned way.** We can't stress this enough. Principals must let teachers know that they are behind them 100% and will do whatever it takes to help them learn how to integrate web 2.0 tools. From hiring substitutes so that teachers can co-teach to visiting classes and showing their approval, principals have to support teachers' professional growth.

Now web 2.0 tools can help you show support. From simple things such as sending texts messages to a teacher's cell phone when you hear good feedback from a parent or leaving positive posts and supportive messages in teachers' virtual classrooms to more involved activities such as creating online extensions of teacher study groups, web 2.0 can help you incorporate your teachers into a buildingwide professional learning community.

5 **Share success stories so teachers can learn from each other.** Let everyone know what other teachers are doing, and upload artifacts and examples of their work. For example, one tech coordinator wanted to share a great project idea with a teacher who was anxious about using technology and couldn't attend after-hours training. The coordinator arranged for in-class training. After the session, the teacher and students were confident and excited about the program. The teacher was surprised and pleased that mastering it had taken so little time. Sharing stories like this among teachers in your school can encourage everyone to try new web 2.0 tools.

6 **Allow teachers to customize their virtual classrooms.** Thanks to the explosion of web 2.0 tools and applications, it seems that not only is there a tool for everything—such as making

your own newscast with Newsmaker or cartoons with ToonDoo—but there are many ways to do the same thing, such as creating online presentations with VoiceThread, Prezi, or PhotoPeach.

Technology leaders can find and make available a plethora of tools, but they should also encourage teachers to mix and match to meet their needs. Teachers we interviewed made decisions with their students about which websites, tools, or activities to use, based on how easy it was to access, try, and embed those sites or the final product into their virtual class websites.

7 **Ease teachers' administrative burdens with simple productivity tools.** We observed teachers using tools that supported the management of classroom activities and materials. It was easy for them to upload and update materials and equally easy for students to download materials and keep track of assignments. In addition, many tools allowed teachers to track student progress (using time stamps, for example).

Generally, there are few or no complicated features to learn, and programming or technical expertise beyond navigation is seldom required. For example, online quizzes and quiz makers, such as BrainPop, Examview, or QuizStar, and some VLEs offer tools to create and administer online quizzes for assessment (or self-assessment). One teacher who used an exam-creation tool in Blackboard felt that it helped her differentiate instruction, making it easy for her to test, teach lessons again, and then retest as many students as she needed.

For more technologically advanced teachers who want to create their own e-learning materials, authoring tools, such as MyUdutu, Raptivity, or Weebly, let them quickly build online units they can then move to their virtual classrooms. One high school language arts teacher had her *Romeo and Juliet*

unit online, complete with links to analytical essays, historical information, and video clips of the same scene from different productions. Moreover, the networked world of web 2.0 makes it easy to create, share, and edit resources with other teachers.

8 **Update tools regularly.** Encourage teachers to look for the products that work best for them and their students. Teachers tell us they love being able to send automated emails or text messages to remind students about assignment deadlines. They also like VLEs that let students submit homework and feature built-in email notification systems to keep parents informed of class activities.

9 **Keep communication open.** Web 2.0 tools allow teachers to extend their communication options, letting students post or send private or public comments to the teacher. Teachers we interviewed were engaged in both public and private online discussion and communication with their students and saw this as an opportunity to move the conversation about what they were studying beyond the textbook and the classroom's walls.

10 **Create clearly defined virtual communities to foster vibrant learning communities.** We all know how important it is to protect students from cyberbullying and other inappropriate communication, so many schools now restrict email, disable commenting, or limit who can view the schools' online spaces. In our research, we learned that there are important pedagogical benefits to allowing certain types of communication but also to limiting communication to classmates, project teams, or schoolmates. Students are very conscious of who is reading their work, and this

K-12 Instructional Resource Center

K12IRC.ORG



Information and Resources for the K-12 community

Over 2,100 carefully selected and annotated links will provide you with the tools you need to create exciting, topical lesson plans and curriculum. Like an Instructional Resource Center in the real world, you will find...

- a solid foundation for supporting standards and assessment practices,
- classroom projects, lessons, units, field trips, extended studies, and international databases in almost every subject and across subjects,
- references and projects to challenge your students,
- ideas & resources to integrate the new media tools,
- tips for school, family, industry, and community partnerships,
- tools for planning, using and managing your own environment,
- professional development and publishing opportunities.

The *K-12 Instructional Resource Center* is chockfull of the best-of-breed resources for designing, implementing, and refreshing lesson plans and curriculum.

Your One-Stop Resource For Curriculum And Professional Development.

Used as a professional development resource by the Stanford School of Education and the Exploratorium, K12IRC.org is a non-profit resource, maintained by Dr. Bonnie Tenenbaum.

<http://www.k12irc.org/iste>

POPULAR WEB 2.0 TOOLS

Authoring Tools

MyUdutu: www.myudutu.com
Raptivity: www.raptivity.com
Weebly: www.weebly.com

Blogs

Edublogs: www.edublogs.org
Google Blogger: www.blogger.com
Kidblog: www.kidblog.org

Communication

Google Talk: www.google.com/talk
Skype: www.skype.com
Yammer: www.yammer.com

Networking

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com
Ning: www.ning.com

Presentations

PhotoPeach: www.photopeach.com
Prezi: www.prezi.com
VoiceThread: www.voicethread.com

Publishing/Productivity

Diigo: www.diigo.com
Google Docs: www.docs.google.com
NewsMaker: www.aboutnewsmaker.com
ToonDoo: www.toondoo.com

Quizzes and Quiz Makers

BrainPop: www.brainpop.com
Examview: www.einstruction.com
QuizStar: www.quizstar.4teachers.org

VLEs

Blackboard: www.blackboard.com
Drupal: www.drupal.org
Edmodo: www.edmodo.com
Moodle: www.moodle.org
Schoology: www.schoology.com

influences what they are willing to write about. Students need to know when classmates will be the only ones reading their blog posts or whether the entire school (or the entire world) could read their posts.

All the schools we visited gave students many tools to support virtual communication but made smart use of the tools' privacy controls, which allowed teachers to set the limits on who posted, emailed, or commented to whom. The entire school community (parents included) must understand if, for example, blogs and postings are private within a classroom or public. Will students' online journals or comments be tracked and documented? Can children discuss topics without fear that they will be exposed or bullied?

One of the most important findings from our research was an emerging web 2.0 mentality. Many define web 2.0 not by the technology, but by how

they use it to support learning and teaching. These tools are interactive: teachers and students can use them asynchronously, collect them as a suite of resources within a virtual platform, and integrate them seamlessly into conversations in ways that extend and deepen the educational environment.

These tips are designed to help principals use web 2.0 tools to build multiple learning communities at their schools—first professional learning communities among teachers that are focused on improving learning and teaching, and then classroom communities to support student learning.



Daniel Light, PhD, has been a researcher at the Center for Children and Technology within the Education Development Center in New York since 1992. His work revolves around the study of how technology can transform classroom culture and the ways that students and teachers interact.