

The Benefits and Concerns of the Read/Write Web in Education: Blogs, Wikis, RSS, and Social Networks, including MySpace.com

So, what are blogs, wikis, RSS, and social networks? And what do these technologies mean for your students? One thing is certain – they are using these technologies outside of school whether you know the answers to these questions or not. There is little doubt that a good deal of *incidental* learning is taking place online, but educators and parents can model more rigorous academic uses for *intentional* learning as well... if they understand the technologies, the benefits, and some of the concerns.

The Read/Write Web

For over a decade the web has been an increasingly important resource for educators and students. They frequently search for information, images, audio files, and video for use in school projects. But, during these activities, the web is *read-only*. Information moves only one-way: from the publishers to the consumers. In recent years, though, things have changed. It is now as easy to *create* as it is to *consume*. Anyone can publish, share, and change information as easily as they can view and download it. There is now a *read/write* web, or a two-way web, what some are calling the Web 2.0.

The Technologies

- Blogs, or weblogs, allow the author to easily create and easily update interactive multimedia websites. *If you can use email, you can blog.* Blogs are generally updated often, even daily, with the newest items typically appearing at the top of the page, and older items moving down before being archived. Most blogs allow visitors to comment on the site.
- Wikis are websites that allow any visitor to edit the content. *If you can use a word processor, you can use a wiki.*
- Real Simple Syndication (RSS) is a technology that allows visitors to subscribe to a blog, wiki, or other service so that there is no need to return to the website to check for updates – because *the updates come to the subscribers.* (RSS is also the technology behind *podcasts*, or online shows that anyone can publish - and anyone can consume at their convenience.)
- Social Networks, such as MySpace.com share much in common with blogs, but they allow users to create a profile of their interests and other personal information. This allows them to *connect with other like-minded individuals online.*

The Benefits

- The read/write web is *engaging and motivating*: Students already enjoy using these social technologies outside of school.
- The read/write web provides a *context* for learning: Students access, process, and create content with an authentic purpose and audience.
- The read/write web facilitates *inquiry*: Students can discover, explore, and contribute to topics that interest them.
- The read/write web supports *critical thinking*: Students can reflect on their learning as they compose their writing. They have to consider issues of audience, purpose, bias, and the reliability of information in the digital age.
- The read/write web provides a framework for *collaboration*: Students can connect with peers and experts using the tools of the 21st Century workplace.

The Concerns

- Students might access *inappropriate content* online. Federal law already mandates that schools and districts show due diligence in protecting students from potentially inappropriate or harmful content, but with the ease of creation comes an explosion in online content, which is increasingly difficult to filter. Whether these sites are blocked or not, it is important to teach students how to respond when they happen upon inappropriate content.
- Because students themselves are creating online content, *inappropriate sharing* is also a concern. Regardless of policies and filters in place at school, students will use these technologies outside of school, so they must be taught to do so responsibly, ethically, and safely. It is easy for students to post the very offensive material they are supposed to be protected from, and if students post threatening material online, this can lead to cyber-bullying and legal consequences.
- The ease of copying material online makes *intellectual property issues* a concern as well. Discussing the norms and values of academic honesty, copyright, and fair use are critical in helping students understand the law and their responsibilities. Students can even be introduced to alternative copyrights such as the creative commons at creativecommons.org.
- The concerns are more serious when the students might be the victims of a crime. Some of the risks of inappropriate sharing are *fraud and theft*, including identity theft. Students need to understand that posting sensitive information about themselves, their family, or their friends can be risky behavior for everyone involved.
- The most grave concern regarding the use of the read/write web by students, and the most serious consequence of inappropriate sharing, is the fear of *cyber stalkers or predators*. For their own safety students must be taught not to post their names, addresses, phone numbers, personal information, or pictures, particularly sexually suggestive images. Students should never make plans to physically meet with someone they met online. Such a meeting is the goal of most predators.

Ultimately, if you want to understand the benefits and risks of these technologies, consider using them and exploring them yourself. In all likelihood this will be a rewarding learning experience. There will probably be some scary moments when the risks become crystal clear, but with that will come understanding and perspective. It may also be an opportunity for meaningful conversation with students, and an opportunity to provide them with the guidance necessary to use these technologies effectively, ethically, and safely.

Reference: Wagner, M. D. (in press). *An Introduction to the Read/Write Web in Education*. Gifted Education Communicator. Summer 2006, Vol. 37, No. 2.

