Web 2.0 and the Demise of the Shelf Concept

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by Steve Rhine
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There has been a gradual erosion of one of my core belief systems. I have done my best to fend off repeated advances on the concept, but I think it is succumbing to pressures outside of my control. It certainly is making me nervous, as I am not entirely clear on the implications if this concept is to ultimately meet its demise. Fad or revolution? I'm not quite sold that it is a revolution, but I am now feeling pangs of discomfort in ways that I haven't before. Is the tide in my mind turning? The concept? The internet is just a really big book shelf.

With the advent of Alta Vista (the first search engine that I called my own), I saw the internet light. I can look for any information in the world with this tiny box. An easier card catalogue! The little librarian inside that box will go out into the world and find my "book" (article, picture, what-have-yas), pull it off of someone's shelf (aka website), and bring it back to me so I can read it. What a deal!

Wikipedia? I know encyclopedias! This is just like paging through my monster old orange Columbia Encyclopedia or set of World Book Encyclopedias I had as a kid, except I don’t have to pull the volume off of the shelf and turn the pages! I just follow the links! It saves my back! I don’t have to empty my piggy back for change, spend hours in the stacks to find the journal I want, and struggle to mash the impenetrable binding to the Xerox machine glass so I can get a copy of that article? I just click "Full Text"? Wow! No more musty smell!

As you can see, my shelf concept was very happy. Each new tool of the internet was at home in the library of my mind.

Now as I merrily assimilated these new phenomena into my world view there were the occasional, irritating thoughts that crept into my brain.
Questions such as: "Where did that website come from?" and "Who wrote Wikipedia anyway?" gently gnawed at my sensibilities, but the shelf concept remained.

Then along came Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms by Will Richardson to tip the balance. I have been skeptical of the blogosphere, wikis, and podcasts as I just can’t understand how people have the time to randomly create content let alone consume what everyone seems to be saying about a topic. However, Mr. Richardson is gradually turning up the dimmer switch so that the light is beginning to take hold in my mind. Two light bulbs, in fact, are beginning to shine and overcome the darkness. Two new ways of thinking are starting to take shape and tear down the walls of the internet library.

Idea #1: The purpose of creative activity is to contribute to the world’s understanding and initiate conversation.

The term "Web 2.0" was developed in 2004 by Dale Dougherty of O’Reilly Media [1]. There is a bit of argument over exactly what it means, but my sense is that it signifies the transformation of the internet from a place for the masses to acquire information to a space in which the masses could create content. The Pew Internet & American Life Project reported in 2003 that 53 million American adults, or almost half of adult internet users had created content on the internet. [2] Ian Kallen of Technorati noted in December of 2007 that 1.5 million blog posts are made each day. [3]

In 2007, Pew reported that 64% of online teenagers had created content, up from 57% in 2004. [4] Web 2.0 is an internet that is evolving away from being simply a library/storehouse of information and towards an interactive, worldwide connection place.

What does this have to do with me, as an educator? Well, I have spent many hours grading papers and returning them to students who quickly dispose of them. I have also spent many hours in the classroom listening
to students' presentations on one topic or another. The parade of groups in front of the classroom is usually engaging for the first few and then begins to drag. Time is eaten away. In spite of my exhortations about the value of students' ideas to students, the only one the group is often talking to is me. Yet, I truly believe in the value of getting students to develop and communicate their thinking collaboratively. Students believe the purpose of creating a product or making a presentation is to accomplish the task assigned by the teacher, make me happy. I want the dynamic exchange of ideas. I want a greater, more valued purpose. Hmmm...

Richardson shares 10 'Big Shifts' that he sees as the result of the dawn of Web 2.0. Shift #10 is that the ultimate goal of activity is not completion, but contribution. "Instead of simply handing in countless assignments to teachers to be read, graded, handed back, and most likely thrown away, we can now offer our students a totally new way of looking at the work they do. It’s not meant for the teacher or the class or even the school. It’s meant for the world, literally. It’s not meant to be discarded or stored in a folder somewhere; it’s meant to be added to the conversation and potentially used to teach others." [5]

Putting information into the web means adding to the knowledge base around a topic so that others might use it. The purpose of creative activity is not to inform one person but to continue the ongoing effort to build understanding. This requires that you have something new to add to the conversation, not just rehash the same ideas. What new ways do you have of looking at the topic? What fresh perspective can you bring to the conversation? This also requires that you listen to the conversation first in order to understand the arguments currently being made. This certainly makes me rethink how I design assignments for my students. Not only can they help fill the library, but they can alter what is in it. They can also develop a sense that what they have to say is of value to others and develop a sense of responsibility to contribute to the dialogue. The investment students might have in their work and the quality of their effort might improve if they know that their ideas will go beyond the four walls of my office.
Idea #2: Learning is achieved through "utilizing collective intelligence." [6]

What is information and how do we learn? Up until recently, the answer was "information is in a book or article". I want to learn something, I pull that book off the shelf. However, Wikipedia has highlighted the fact that information is dynamic and not static. I was on the CNN website recently and a news flash came up that Castro had just stepped down and his brother Raul was now president. I wondered aloud "How old is Raul Castro?" and decided to find out on Wikipedia. It turns out he is 76, but more importantly it said on Wikipedia that he was now president of Cuba as of an hour ago. Now, technically that information was incorrect, because it was February 19th and the National Assembly didn’t elect him until February 24th, but that moment demonstrated two things. First, that the internet library has "books" flying on and off the shelves so fast that I’m not so sure the shelf concept is serving me well anymore. Information changes every second and the internet makes it possible to keep up with the dizzying pace of changing ideas. Second, that Wikipedia opens the door to the concept of collective intelligence. Shortly after my visit to the site, someone corrected the entry for Raul.

I was still hanging on to my shelf concept by a thread when Richardson made the final snip. How do I generally learn something? I might look up a book or article. I might ask some friends. I might even type a word or phrase into Google. Those are all shelf strategies. My field of view is constrained by my knowledge base or network and the 10-20 hits I might look up on Google. Richardson’s perspective of collective intelligence is an exponential leap.

Tens, hundreds, or even thousands of people have looked for, documented, and talked about the topic in which I am currently interested. They have found books and articles, bookmarked websites, blogged about perspectives, and developed databases. If I could tap into all of their work, it would be like an army of librarians working for me to find out about this topic. My network has just enlarged incalculably.
However, there is no way that I could possibly get through all of it and find out just what is relevant to me! Information overload!! Or is there...?

If you only have time to read 10 pages in your life, read Chapter 5. Enter the world of RSS (Really Simple Syndication). Now I know how to subscribe to a podcast with iTunes, so I understand RSS. Every week Bill Moyer is downloaded to my computer without me even thinking about it. Richardson takes it further. With an aggregator such as Bloglines you can subscribe to anything that has an RSS feed...news outlets, journals, blogs, etc. You can filter that content by topic so you only get new information about just what you are looking for. Any new information on your topic is automatically found and brought to your doorstep. You can create RSS feeds for search terms!

One way of doing this is to use Google News’ advanced search feature. You can narrow the field to just the sources you want and the exact terms you want in or out. When you hit "search" the results are returned with an RSS button. If you like the results, paste the feed into your aggregator and any time something new about your topic is published it comes to you.

One thing all of us should worry about is the quality of information we receive. With a site such as del.icio.us.com, the concept of collective intelligence really starts to make sense to me. Instead of having Google algorithms determine the relevancy and quality of information coming your way, how about having humans do it for you? Del.icio.us is a social bookmarking site where people collect website links about particular topics. They tag the sites with key words. [7] Del.icio.us takes all the sites that have been tagged with the same key words you are looking for and connect them and the people who tagged them. You find out who is looking for what you are looking for and benefit from their efforts. Wikipedia points out that the advantage of social bookmarking is that "as people bookmark resources that they find useful, resources that are of more use are bookmarked by more users. Thus, such a system will 'rank' a resource based on its perceived utility." [8] Richardson describes
this process as "no longer taxonomy but 'folksonomy.'" [9] People collectively decide the value of information and raise it in the hierarchy. The more people use a resource, the more likely it has value.

The PEW folks summarize Richardson’s points concisely: Web 2.0 applications "replace the authoritative heft of traditional institutions with the surging wisdom of crowds." [10] The shelf is dead, long live the Borg.

I’ll close with the words of poet, essayist, and former lyricist for the Grateful Dead, John Perry Barlow at the dawn of the internet age in 1994: "The economy of the future will be based on relationship rather than possession. It will be continuous rather than sequential. And finally, in the years to come, most human exchange will be virtual rather than physical, consisting not of stuff but the stuff of which dreams are made." [11]

[1] "What is Web 2.0," by Tim O’Reilly. Published on the O’Reilly website on September 30, 2005:


[4] “Reports: Family, Friends, and Community.” By Amanda Lenhart, Mary Madden, Alexandra Rankin Macgill, and Aaron Smith. Published on the Pew Internet & American Life Project website on


