

WEB 2.0 AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

- As distance education has shifted from a didactic framework to a constructivist way of learning, so has web technology shifted from the one-way street of the old read-only web to the multi-polar read-write Web 2.0.
- In order to understand the importance of Web 2.0 to DE, we should understand the technologies in distance education by linking them to key concepts that define DE's response to our evolving society at large: community, passion, and creativity.

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- Community, passion, and creativity, through the use of current web technologies allow additional avenues for self-presentation that may lead to a new learning culture that uses the whole mind, including its pop culture and personal influences.
- In particular six essential elements of conceptual, artistic, and holistic learning may benefit from Web 2.0 technologies. They are design, story, symphony, empathy, play, and meaning.

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- **Design** (not just function): a sense of design that both complements constructivist approaches to learning and opens the door for more creative and passionate learning environments.

- **Story** (not just argument): digital story-telling that has become possible using hypertext and new media and which transcends in quality and opportunity the expression of facts strung together to make an argument. This art of story-telling can provide opportunities for self-expression by learners as it evolves into personalized forms with the aid of the next generation of accessible web technologies.

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- **Symphony** (not just focus): The ability to move beyond simply presenting facts to harmonizing facts into a dynamic new whole, thus synthesizing new knowledge.
- **Empathy** (not just logic): The multi-avenue streams of communication afforded by Web 2.0 technologies, together with the practice of constructivism, allows learners to better participate in the affective domain of learning. This interactive setting allows learners to share of themselves with one another and to make a familiar home within the digital learning domain, which leads to and enhances a sense of community.

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- **Play** (not just seriousness): A sense of play is essential for creatively responding to modern society which in turn means play is part of a challenging, personalized learning dynamic that encourages sharing, community, and working in groups. Web 2.0 resources lend themselves particularly well to this need.
- **Meaning** (not just accumulation): We have accumulated information, and now we look to make meaning of that information in the Conceptual Age by putting together the pieces and making meaningful connections within content, between learner and content, and between learners in a multi-dimensional and dynamic environment.

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Blogs, wikis, and social bookmarking make-up the bulk of Web 2.0 tools that can be readily and easily adapted to the DE environment. They allow for networking between teachers and learners from a distance, collaboration on projects between learners, and enhance organization and easier use and reference for informational sources in a digital world. They also enhance self-expression from students and allow enhanced reflection and a more democratic learning environment. These tools are almost always free, are web-based, and can be deployed in a variety of settings so long as a computer and internet connection are available.

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Blogging may be the most common of Web 2.0 technologies. Students use their blogs in several ways, including community building, resource-consolidation, sharing ideas, catharsis and emotional support, or as a personal journal. In a recent Distance Education course where a personal blog was a required portion of the class the students found it to be both challenging and rewarding since it allowed deep introspection about their learning in the course.

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Wikis are another commonly cited web 2.0 tool in education that allows students to collaborate on the creation of a web page about a topic under study. Wikis may use a similar underlying technology as a blog, but with a focus on collaboration. A wiki allows its users to edit and add contents and is therefore a suitable platform where learners can design, organize, outline, write, edit, revise, and complete online distance learning materials together. Projects and research papers can be collaborated through wiki in a democratic atmosphere.

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- Web 2.0 bookmark tools such as del.icio.us allow teachers and/or students conducting online research to capture links and then add tags, categories, and annotations to organize and make sense of the data.
- Del.icio.us includes several features that make it a social bookmarking tool. Each del.icio.us account generates a unique URL, so saved bookmarks can be accessed by the public. Other users can be added to one's del.icio.us network, so the saved bookmarks can be easily viewed and tracked.

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- Teachers that have experimented with social book marking's collaborative aspects say that it has helped them as teachers by allowing them to organize their many saved links and allow them to find a needed link quickly. Distance education learners can expect similar benefits within their overall digital learning environments.

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Cost is a significant reason for integrating web 2.0 tools in DE. Many of the web 2.0 tools that are available are free or low cost. They provide teachers with a set of tools that can be used across multiple school settings and socioeconomic areas assuming the teacher and students can access high-speed internet. The free tools also allow teachers and students to gain technology experience in an economic and legal way.

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- Assignments requiring fee-based desktop-based software such as Microsoft Office can be successfully replaced with assignments using free web-based tools such as blogs, wikis, Google Docs and Spreadsheets, and del.icio.us.
- In addition to reduced cost, Google Docs and Spreadsheets are web 2.0 tools that allow multiple users to collaborate and co-edit either word-processed documents or spreadsheets.

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Instead of relying on commercially produced cookie-cutter multimedia to teach students about a concept such as cell biology, teachers may employ Web 2.0 software and task their students with creating their own presentations on the topic. This allows students to not only learn about the topic but to also learn research and collaboration skills, which will be integral to their future in the work place.

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- Utilizing Web 2.0 does bring with it a set of challenges to be aware of as distance educators, administrators, and learners. Issues of privacy and copyright take on new importance in the more collaborative and public, and less one-sided and hidden world of Web 2.0. Tools often leave an information trail, and shared bookmarks that can be accessed by the general public unless marked private.
- Due to the public nature of products created with Web 2.0 technologies, instructors may need to discuss issues such as copyright tied to creating media-rich presentations for public consumption online, or making false claims or representations in public blogs created by students.

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Faculty should be aware that requiring students to use public web 2.0 tools in a course may conflict with students' rights to privacy, and thinking of ways to balance the benefits of Web 2.0 against students' privacy concerns should be considered. For example, the North Carolina State University libraries recommend Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) consent forms to be completed by students and submitted to the instructor prior to class start.

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Another consideration is the beta disclaimer on many new web 2.0 sites. Indeed, many Web 2.0 applications are in a constant state of revision since they are web-based and updates to add features or make other improvements are easily implemented. Since many tools are free of charge, instructors should be aware that some start-up applications may contain bugs. No guarantee is provided for the longevity of a start-up tool although increased use of tools by educators can impact which tools survive and thrive in the competitive Web 2.0 field.

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- Since many Web 2.0 tools are free of charge and some may not have the quality control budgets of large companies behind them, instructors and administrators should test tools of interest to determine they work properly and to know specific requirements and capabilities that may be required of their students' computers. This may avoid problems that may hamper progress of the course.
- With thoughtful use of Web 2.0 tools, DE teachers and learners can bring current web technology side-by-side with current theories of learning in order to teach and learn in modern, suitable, and practical digital environments.

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