

Footprints



In the Web 2.0 world, self-directed learners must be adept at building and sustaining networks.

Will Richardson

As the geeky father of a 9-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter, one of my worst fears as they grow older is that they won't be Googled well. Not that they won't be able to use Google well, mind you, but that when a certain someone (read: admissions officer, employer, potential mate) enters "Tess Richardson" into the search line of the browser, what comes up will be less than impressive. That a quick surf through the top five hits will fail to astound with examples of her creativity, collaborative skills, and change-the-world work. Or, even worse, that no links about her will come up at all. I mean, what might "Your search did not match any documents" imply?

It's a consequence of the new Web 2.0 world that these digital footprints—the online portfolios of who we are, what we do, and by association, what we know—are becoming increasingly woven into the fabric of almost every aspect of our lives. In all likelihood, you, your school, your teachers, or your students are already being Googled on a regular basis, with information surfacing from news articles, blog posts, YouTube videos, Flickr photos, and Facebook groups. Some of it may be good, some may be bad, and most is beyond your control. Your personal footprint—and to some extent your schools—is most likely being written without you, thanks to the billions of us worldwide who now have our own printing presses and can publish what we want when we want to.

On the surface, that's an unsettling thought—but it doesn't have to be. In fact, if we are willing to embrace the moment rather than recoil from it, we may find opportunities to empower students to learn deeply and continually in ways that we could scarcely have imagined just a decade ago.

Networking: The New Literacy

Whether we like it or not, social Web technologies are having a huge influence on students who are lucky enough to be connected, even the youngest ones. Many 7- and 8-year-olds are busy exploring Club Penguin or Webkinz with other 7- and 8-year-olds half a world away, middle schoolers are connecting with global warriors in World of Warcraft, and adolescents preen themselves in front of their "friends" on MySpace and Facebook. A recent National School Boards Association survey (2007) announced that upward of 80 percent of young people who are online are networking and that 70 percent of them are regularly discussing education-related topics. They're creating all sorts of content—some, as we all know, doing so very badly—and they're doing all sorts of things with online tools that, for the most part, we're not teaching them anything about. In the process, they're becoming Googleable without us. By and large, they do all this creating, publishing, and learning on their own, outside school, because when they enter the classroom, they typically "turn off the lights" (Prensky, 2008).

This may be the first large technological shift in history that's being driven by children. Picture a bus. Your students are standing in the front; most teachers (maybe even you) are in the back, hanging on to the seat straps as the bus careens down the road under the guidance of kids who have never been taught to steer and who are figuring it out as they go.

In short, for a host of reasons, we're failing to empower kids to use one of the most important technologies for learning that we've ever had. One of the biggest challenges educators face right now is figuring out how to help students create, navigate, and grow the powerful, individualized networks of learning that

in the Digital Age



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bloom on the Web and helping them do this effectively, ethically, and safely. The new literacy means being able to function in and leverage the potential of easy-to-create, collaborative, transparent online groups and networks, which represent a “tectonic shift” in the way we need to think about the world and our place in it (Shirky, 2008). This shift requires us to create engaged learners, not simply knowers, and to reconsider the roles of schools and educators.

As author John Seely Brown (Brown & Adler, 2008) points out, these shifts demand that we move our concept of learning from a “supply-push” model of “building up an inventory of knowledge in the students’ heads” (p. 30) to a

“demand-pull” approach that requires students to own their learning processes and pursue learning, based on their needs of the moment, in social and possibly global communities of practice. Our students must be nomadic, flexible, mobile learners who depend not so much on what they can recall as on their ability to connect with people and resources and edit content on their desktops, or, even more likely, on pocket-size devices they carry around with them. Our teachers have to be colearners in this process, modeling their own use of connections and networks and understanding the practical pedagogical implications of these technologies and online social learning spaces.

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Transparent and Trackable

So what literacies must we educators master before we can help students make the most of these powerful poten-

tials? It starts, as author Clay Shirky (2008) suggests, with an understanding of how transparency fosters connections and with a willingness to share our work and, to some extent, our personal lives. Sharing is the fundamental building block for building connections and networks; it may take the form of ruminations on life in a blog, photos of the latest family picnic on Flickr, or discussion notes students post to a classroom wiki for others to read and contribute to.

Publishing content online not only begins the process of becoming “Googleable,” it also makes us findable by others who share our passions or interests. A few years ago, the teacher who stood up in a professional development gathering in Atlanta, Georgia, and voiced his passion for “mountain biking—on a unicycle” would have had little ability to find others who enjoy such pursuits and learn with them about that avocation. Today, he can easily connect to other “municyclists” who share their adventures on their blogs or in YouTube videos. In doing so, provided he knows whom and what to trust, he can learn a great deal.

Although many students are used to sharing content online, they need to learn how to share within the context of network building. They need to know that publishing has a nobler goal than just readership—and that’s engagement. Take, for example, the story of Laura Stockman, a 10-year-old from the Buffalo, New York, area. Last December, in an effort to honor the memory of her grandfather who had died the year

before, Laura decided to do one good deed each day in the run-up to Christmas. She decided, with her mother’s approval, to share her work with the world.

Laura’s blog, “Twenty-Five Days to Make a Difference” (<http://twentyfivedays.wordpress.com>), quickly caught the eye of some other philanthropic bloggers. Within a short time, Laura found herself in the midst of a community of volunteers far outside her geographic reach. The ClustrMap on her site tracks tens of thousands of readers from such places as China, Australia, Africa, and South America (see <http://www3.clustrmaps.com/counter/maps.php?user=2cf404cc>).

But here is the difference: Laura is not just publishing, and others are not just reading. Now when she wants ideas for charities to work for as her project enters its 11th month, Laura says, “I ask my readers” (Richardson, 2008). She has collected hundreds of books for local libraries and dozens of pajamas for kids in need; she has raised thousands of dollars for charities ranging from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to local homeless shelters. In fact, Laura has become a go-to expert on younger kids doing charity work. Last April, students in Florida who wanted to make a difference in their own community interviewed her live online. Her interactions with her network, on both her blog and the other blogs she reads, teach her much about a passion that is not in the standard curriculum. In the process, Laura is already on her way to being Googled well.

In addition, under her mother’s guidance and care, Laura is learning online network literacies firsthand. As Stanford researcher Danah Boyd (2007) points out, we are discovering the potentials and pitfalls of this new public space. What we say today in our blogs and videos will persist long into the future and not simply end up in the paper recycling bin when we clean out our

desks at the end of the year. What we say is copyable; others can take it, use it, or change it with ease, making our ability to edit content and comprehend the ethical use of the content we read even more crucial. The things we create are searchable to an extent never before imagined and will be viewed by all sorts of audiences, both intended and unintended.

What Students Need to Know

These new realities demand that we prepare students to be educated, sophisticated owners of online spaces. Although Laura is able to connect, does she understand, as researcher Stephen Downes (2005) suggests, that her network must be diverse, that she must actively seek dissenting voices who might push her thinking in ways that the “echo chamber” of kindred thinkers might not? Is she doing the work of finding new voices to include in the conversation? Is she able to make astute decisions about the people with whom she interacts, keeping herself safe from those who might mean her harm? Is she learning balance in her use of technology, or is she falling into the common pattern of spending hours at the keyboard, losing herself in the network? This 10-year-old probably still needs to learn many of these things, and she needs the guidance of teachers and adults who know them in their own practice.

More than ever before, students have the potential to own their own learning—and we have to help them seize that potential. We must help them learn how to identify their passions; build connections to others who share those passions; and communicate, collaborate, and work collectively with these networks. And we must do this not simply as a unit built around “Information and Web Literacy.” Instead, we must make these new ways of collaborating and connecting a transparent part

of the way we deliver curriculum from kindergarten to graduation.

Younger students need to see their teachers engaging experts in synchronous or asynchronous online conversations about content, and they need to begin to practice intelligently and appropriately sharing work with global audiences. Middle school students should be engaged in the process of cooperating and collaborating with others outside the classroom around their shared passions, just as they have

Get Started!

Here are five ideas that will help you begin building your own personal learning network.

1. *Read blogs related to your passion.* Search out topics of interest at <http://blogsearch.google.com> and see who shares those interests.
2. *Participate.* If you find bloggers out there who are writing interesting and relevant posts, share your reflections and experiences by commenting on their posts.
3. *Use your real name.* It's a requisite step to be Googled well. Be prudent, of course, about divulging any personal information that puts you at risk, and guide students in how they can do the same.
4. *Start a Facebook page.* Educators need to understand the potential of social networking for themselves.
5. *Explore Twitter* (<http://twitter.com>), a free social networking and micro-blogging service that enables users to exchange short updates of 140 characters or fewer. It may not look like much at first glance, but with Twitter, the network can be at your fingertips.

seen their teachers do. And older students should be engaging in the hard work of what Shirky (2008) calls “collective action,” sharing responsibility and outcomes in doing real work for real purposes for real audiences online.

But to do all that, we educators must first own these technologies and be able to take advantage of these networked learning spaces. In this way, we can fully prepare students not just to be Googled well, but to be findable in good ways by people who share their passions for learning and who may well end up being lifelong teachers, mentors, or friends. ■

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Will Richardson is the author of *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Tools for Classrooms* (Corwin Press, 2006) and cofounder of Powerful Learning Practice (<http://plpnetwork.com>). He blogs at <http://weblogg-ed.com> and can be reached at weblogged@gmail.com.

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