

An Introduction to the New Web (Web 2.0)

By David Warlick

Introduction

At the turn of the century, teachers in classrooms across the U.S. and many other parts of the world were becoming acquainted with newly arrived multimedia computers and *broadband* access to the Internet. We were exploring new techniques for utilizing these seemingly magical tools to facilitate better teaching and learning. We also recognized the importance of these technologies in preparing our children for what will surely be a future that is heavily influenced by computers and global networks. We explored a wide variety of new web-based instructional services and learned to build webquests for our students, to provide rich inquiry activities to help students learn to use the Net to teach themselves and to use their growing knowledge and skills to produce new knowledge and valuable information products.

At that giddy time, none of us had heard of Blogs. If we had heard the term, we probably would have envisioned a mass of something that was probably too uninterested in knowing any more about.

Yet today, blogs have become an important and moving force in politics, entertainment, art, religion, and most other aspects of modern society. Blogs were fairly limited to the technorati in early 2004 with growing indications of its potential importance emerging in many likely places. My first blog experience was with a regular publication, called **Where is Raed?**. Published on a surprisingly steady basis, the author described daily events and details about life in Baghdad in early 2003, as U.S. troops massed on the borders of his country. As people in the U.S. and other countries watched CNN, listened to NPR, and read their favorite daily and weekly news print sources, many of them also tuned into **Where is Raed?** to learn about how the imminent invasion was affecting the residents of this far away country that we had heard so much about over the last decade.

I had a conceptual understand of what a blog was, that it was a way for almost anyone, regardless of their technical expertise, to publish information for global audiences over the Internet. I was not especially impressed with the practice. Technically, I had built a number of online tools for teachers that worked very much the same way, enabling them to publish content to their students and other classroom stakeholders, without technology (HTML, FTP, XML, etc.) getting in the way.

However, when I read this particular blog, I began to move beyond the concept as merely a clever application of technology, toward understanding the potential impact of **giving voice to people like you and me**. One of the ideas that I will visit and revisit in this book is the importance and potential benefits of making our children part of...

The Great Discussion,

...an ongoing public exchange and cultivation of ideas that was once limited to hired and elected leaders, journalists, and pundits. Today, the discussion is increasingly influenced and contributed to by nearly all walks of people, who observe, reflect, and report – a new society of *citizen journalists*.

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It was not lost on me that I did not know the author of **Where is Raed?**, nor was there an obvious way to research and prove his authority. However, when I *Googled* the title of the popular blog, I immediately received approximately 3,500 web pages that mentioned it. Of the ones that I examined, a vast majority were message boards where people were discussing just this thing – was the author genuinely a citizen of Iraq living in Baghdad, or a college student in Kansas, pulling something over on us. The point is that people were considering and talking about the publication, not just what was being published. They were seeking and discussing information about the information, rather than accepting the information.

This points to another idea that will arise again in this book, that we must no longer assume the authority of the information we use, but, instead, prove the authority. This is a major shift that is critical for our classrooms, not only in **what we teach our students**, but also **how we teach our students**.

In the end, a New York Times journalist, Peter Maass, returned to the U.S. shortly after the invasion, and began to read the “Baghdad Blogger”, having returned to his cable modem. As he read through the articles and other references to the author, he learned that Salam Pax, the author’s pseudonym, had worked with an NGO called CIVIC, studied in Vienna, and worked as a translator for several foreign journalists. Peter Maass later reported in *SLATE Magazine*:

His latest post mentioned an afternoon he spent at the Hamra Hotel pool, reading a borrowed copy of The New Yorker. I laughed out loud. He then mentioned an escapade in which he helped deliver 24 pizzas to American soldiers. I howled. Salam Pax, the most famous and most mysterious blogger in the world, was my interpreter. The New Yorker he had been reading—mine. Poolside at the Hamra—with me. The 24 pizzas—we had taken them to a unit of 82nd Airborne soldiers I was writing about.ⁱ

Since then blogs were catapulted to our attention when Howard Dean ingeniously used the medium to attract millions in contributions for his presidential campaign. Publishing a blog quickly became an integral part of political campaigning, and candidates without them were seen as behind the times and consequently irrelevant. Blogging also surfaced as a prevalent avenue for reporting on campaigns. As more and more people are turning to the web for their news, and as

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publishing content to the web has become so accessible, it is only natural that blogging should become a force in how we use information to make our decisions.

A Disruptive Technology

I recently attended a *bloggercon*^{*}, one of many conferences around the country and doubtless beyond, attended by bloggers and those who are directly concerned with this new avenue of communication. I had very little inkling of what to expect. I attend and work conferences as a living, and am quite familiar with how they work. Participants attend various presentations to learn more about specific topics that are of importance or interest to them, listening to experts in that area.

I found that a bloggercon is entirely different. Rather than a classroom arrangement, with a class leader and attendees politely listening, all sessions seemingly degraded into rather spontaneous, but courteous (or not) discussions. I left somewhat unsatisfied with the event. However, upon reflecting on the experience, I realized that the session was mirroring the act of blogging in a direct way. All participants had equal voice, equal right, and equal opportunity to share their ideas. As I now attend other blogger events since realizing their format, I leave with a wealth of knowledge, and frequently blog the events, so that my readers can share in my new knowledge as well (<http://davidwarlick.com/blog/>).

I discovered at my first bloggercon a certain contention between bloggers and traditional journalists. It is logical that many journalists have resented the increased notoriety of bloggers as reporters of their experience, and that they should caution us (rightly) to be suspicious of the news we read in blogs. They point to the value of traditional sources of the news because of the practices that most news publishers and networks undertake to assure accuracy and objectivity. Many of you may cynically scoff at that last statement as all of us can state times when traditional journalism inadvertently reported what was inaccurate and bent toward a particular side of the issue. Still, the news industry has a stake in preserving their reputation as a reliable source of information. So they have a right to distrust these new citizen journalists writing their blogs in bathrobes and slippers.

On the other side, bloggers aspire to a new environment where we all observe, reflect, and share and that the reader has the right, and the skill, to make their own decisions on the information they use. One notable exception to this conflict between traditional journalism and the blogosphere is the *News & Record*, the daily newspaper of Greensboro, North Carolina. The editors, of what is the sole source of daily print news for the citizens of North Carolina's Triad region, decided early on to embrace the new publishing paradigm. They have even invited local citizens to blog about the news and include some articles in their print publication.

* **Bloggercon** – A meeting or conference of bloggers, where a variety of issues are discussed, but rarely settled. Most bloggercons are fairly local, addressing issues of blogging in a particular city or region.

The paper's online version has taken on a general blog look with many of the stories and all editorials appearing as blog articles. The editor's page is a blog, called *The Editor's Log* (<http://blog.news-record.com/jrblog/>). One of the principal blogger journalists in the country is Ed Cone, a reporter for this forward looking newspaper.

Aside from the logical disruption between traditional and blog-based journalism, the growing blogosphere has been responsible for some major changes in our national and international lives. Consider Trent Lott, once the most powerful man in the U.S. Senate, and now the only Senate Majority Leader ever to resign under pressure. It started when attending Senator Strom Thurman's 100th birthday party. Lott said, "When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years either." Thurman had been an ardent defender of segregation. It was his signature issue. Lott **appeared** to be aligning himself with that issue.

Interestingly, the mainstream news did not pay attention, and did not report the statement. However, bloggers did, and as a result, the story came to light, eventually moving conservative writer David Frum to call Lott's words, "...the most emphatic repudiation of desegregation to be heard from a national political figure since George Wallace's first presidential campaign."ⁱⁱ

In the following months, Eason Jordan, cofounder of *CNN*, and Dan Rather resigned under pressure for misstatements and manipulative reporting under the watchful eyes of a growing number of citizen journalists – bloggers.

For this and other reasons, blogs have become the *mot du jour*, recognized by Merriam- Webster as the 2004 **Word of the Year**, and bloggers identified as the **People of the Year** by *ABCNews*ⁱⁱⁱ. According to a data memo from the Pew Internet & American Life Project, Lee Rainie, PIP Director, reported in January 2005 that 7% of the 120 million U.S. adults who use the Internet are, or have been, bloggers. Twenty-seven percent report to be blog readers, up from 17% in February 2004. Still, 62% of Net using U.S. residents do not know what a blog is.^{iv} I'll let you find significance in that.

What is important to us, as educators, is the direct and conspicuous relationship between blogging and literacy. It is about writing and reading – communicating. If we can tap into the sudden notoriety of blogging as a *cool thing to do*, giving our students authentic assignments of finding, reading, and evaluating blog-based information within the context of curriculum, and then make them bloggers, communicators with a broadening audience, then we may do a more effective job of teaching literacy, both in the traditional sense, and within the context of an emerging new definition of literacy in a networked, digital information environment.

Magic Behind the Curtain

At the same time that blogging is easy enough for most first graders and senior citizens, it is important to note that some pretty fancy stuff happens within the network. RSS is one example of the powerful information functions that are happening as you submit your article.

The growing problem among blog readers is that following fifteen or more becomes difficult when you have to visit each of those web pages each day. This is a time consuming endeavor and most people simply do not take the time to visit the same web pages every day. Enter RSS. This acronym stands for something so esoterically technical that no one remembers what it is. Most people refer to it as *Really Simple Syndication*. This may well be the most complicated thing that we cover in this book, so go get a cup of coffee and sit down to learn how the nature of how we search for and use information is about to change. So let's try to get the geekie stuff over with quickly.

When I pressed the submit button to add my new article to the blog, it did not just make a new blog page. It also generated a parallel document that listed information about all of my blog articles in a machine-readable code called XML*. The XML file is not intended to be read by people, although you can see the code by clicking one of the orange RSS or XML buttons that you see on many blog pages.

XML documents can be sniffed out by special software enabling the content of the file, and consequently your blog articles, to automatically be linked into the blog web – and it happens very quickly. This is important, since blogging is more of a conversation, and conversations are immediate. It is critical that your statement becomes part of the conversation as quickly as possible.

The other benefit of this XML file is RSS. I now must bring in one more bothersome word, *Aggregators**. Perhaps the best way to introduce aggregators is to show you one. The most commonly used example is Bloglines (<http://bloglines.com>), a web site with aggregator software operating in the background.

* XML stands for eXtensible Markup Language. It is sometimes called a meta language because it codes information about the information that can be accessed and processed by computer software.

* Aggregators are software that enable users to subscribe to RSS feeds by linking the software to the URL of the information's XML file. The aggregator will then regularly access the XML file in order to determine if new information has been added, and access and present the information in human readable form.

Blogger's Contract

Acknowledging that blogging is a legitimate and authentic form of journalistic publication, student and teacher bloggers must adhere to essential principles of ethics. The free exchange and publication of information can help people in important ways. At the same time information can also harm people either intentionally or unintentionally.

Being a responsible participant in **the great online conversation**, I pledge that I will use information to:

- ❑ Honestly and joyously express the truth, and that if challenged, I will be able to prove that what I write or say is true,
- ❑ Always treat all people with respect. I will never use information to cause harm or appear to cause harm to any person or group of people, and
- ❑ Respect and protect information tools and that I will neither do any harm to a computer system, network, software, or other person's information; nor will I allow others to do harm to a computer system, network, software, or other person's information.
- ❑ I will always be accountable for the information that I produce and publish, willing and able to defend my information or acknowledge when I have made a mistake and fix it.

Teacher

Student

Works & Resources Cited

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^{iv} Rainie, Lee. "Data Memo: The State of Blogging." Pew Internet & American Life Project. Jan. 2005. Pew Internet & American Life Project. 18 Apr. 2005 <http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_blogging_data.pdf>.