Participatory Culture and Schools: Can We Get There From Here?

Digital media and Web 2.0 offer an opportunity to bridge the two-culture gap between online youth and largely offline schools.

BY JAMES BOSCO

IN 1959, THE BRITISH SCIENTIST AND NOVELIST C.P. SNOW WROTE ABOUT THE TWO CULTURES problem (sciences vs. humanities) of modern society. We could steal his term and use it to characterize the two-culture problem our kids experience as a consequence of the dramatic proliferation of Web 2.0 applications. Applications such as social networking, blogs, recreational and educational collaborative games, and publishing of videos, pictures, stories, and commentaries have a pervasive presence in their personal lives and the lives of their friends. But the presence and effective use of these applications for learning in schools is much less prevalent. Thus, young people experience the two-culture problem as they move between in-school culture and out-of-school culture.

The gap between the world inside of schools and outside of schools was brought home to me in a conversation with a colleague while I was writing this article. She has a relative who is a school administrator, and she told me about an incident that had occurred recently in his district. One of the male administrators was accused of sending a female high school student an inappropriate text message. My colleague's relative told her that, even if the message was not objectionable, it was wrong for a teacher or administrator to text a student since this is how *kids* communicate. The anecdote illustrates a perspective held by an appreciable number of school personnel: media that is used extensively by young people does not belong in schools. Those technologies are *their* things!

At a Crossroads

The Internet, and particularly Web 2.0, has resulted in new questions that get to the heart of how human culture is created and maintained: Who has access to the existing information or knowledge? Is information valid if non-experts produce it? From whom or what do we learn? How do we find people with whom we wish to share information and cultivate friendships?

In the report "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century," MIT humanities professor Henry Jenkins uses the term *participatory culture* to characterize the way in which the Web (along with other influences) has changed the answers to the above questions. Participatory culture is characterized by membership in online groups with few or no entry barriers, the creation of intellectual or artistic products by non-credentialed individuals or groups, collaborative problem solving, the ability to form or join general or specialized social networks, and the capability to disseminate artistic and intellectual products easily and effectively. In essence, participatory culture shifts us from a situation with a small number of producers of information and knowledge to a new realm in which many of those who previously would be consumers are now also producers.

Participatory culture in schools would mean that students are expected to be actively engaged contributors to the intellectual and artistic content of their schooling rather than just passive receivers of a curriculum. Isn't it reasonable to expect that schools, as critical agencies for the transference of culture to each succeeding generation, should be compatible with the world of information, knowledge, communications, and collaboration as it exists today?

The Starting Point

The starting point for a discussion about Web 2.0 in schools is the recognition that the use of Web 2.0 is taken for granted in the lives of our youth. A Pew Internet & American Life survey that collected data in the last quarter of 2006 found that 93 percent of teens use the Internet and that a substantial percentage use the Internet for social interaction. Fifty-five percent of American youths (ages 12 to 17) use social networking, 28 percent maintain blogs, and 39 percent use the Internet to share artistic creations.

A study commissioned by the National School Boards Association found even higher percentages of Web 2.0 usage. This study collected data in Spring 2007 and reported that 96 percent of 9- to 17-year-olds with online access use social-networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, or KinzChat. There is little doubt that the numbers from 2009 would show a comparable increase.

More recently, Mizuko Ito and her colleagues at the University of Southern California and the University of California at Berkeley have provided the most detailed picture of the use of Web 2.0 as a result of conducting hundreds of interviews, more than 5,000 hours of observations, and numerous other data-collection procedures over the past two years. The opening words of their report put their basic finding succinctly:

> Social network sites, online games, video-sharing sites, and gadgets such as iPods and mobile phones are now fixtures of youth culture. They have so permeated young lives that it is hard to believe that less than a decade ago these technologies barely existed.

While some of today's Web 2.0 applications will be superseded by new ones over time, there is no reason to expect that the use of the Internet to develop relationships, collaborate, share information, produce media, and play games with others will become passé. Far from being a kid thing, Web 2.0 applications already play an increasing role in business, the arts and sciences, government, civic affairs, informal education, and recreation. Today's students will not put these resources behind them when they become adults.

Protect - Preserve - Progress

Three themes describe the way schools are contending with Web 2.0. The first is the "protect theme." This orientation stems from concern over how to protect children from the deleterious consequences of the Web, such as sexual predators, inappropriate content, and cyberbullies. Bad things can happen to kids as a result of Internet use, so it is not unreasonable for school personnel, when they are operating *in loco parentis,* to recognize a need to protect kids.

However, the major impetus for protecting kids in schools from inappropriate content on the Internet is federal and state law. The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) of 2003 requires schools to filter or block access to inappropriate materials on the district network and to adopt a policy that addresses the safety and security of minors using e-mail, chat rooms, and other forms of electronic communications. Failure to do so disqualifies the district for discounts on computer hardware provided by the federal E-Rate Program. More recently, the Broadband Data Improvement Act signed by President George W. Bush in 2008 includes specific provisions regarding Internet safety education in schools. And in 2006, Virginia became the first state to mandate teaching of Internet safety in all its schools.

CIPA also requires districts to educate minors about inappropriate behavior on social-networking sites. Since the law has little specificity about what educating children with regard to inappropriate behavior means, the effect of this requirement seems inconsequential. School districts that have established programs to educate kids on appropriate Internet behavior do so because they recognize they can provide a valuable service for students that goes beyond the minimum compliance rules of a vague federal mandate.

Most schools require students and/or parents to sign an acceptable-use policy that stipulates appropriate and inappropriate use of the school network. Some schools now include specific language pertaining to Web 2.0 in their acceptable-use policy; others districts deal with Web 2.0 in their policy's generic language. A signature on an acceptable-use policy could be construed as the way the district complies with the provision to educate students, but that stretches the term *educate* well past the breaking point.

Another dimension of protection involves safeguarding instructional time from interference. Teachers do not want students to be text messaging a friend about a party on the weekend, revising their Facebook profile, or checking out a Twitter tweet during class time. Many schools ban handheld electronic devices for this reason. In April 2008, the New York state appeals court upheld the banning of cell phones in New York City public schools. And New York is not alone; many other schools ban cell phones.

The second theme in how schools are dealing with Web 2.0 is the "preserve theme." This involves integrating Web 2.0 applications with the curriculum and pedagogy. If the goal is to get teachers to use technology, then a good tactic for selling it to school administrators is to show how the technology can be used without disturbing the existing program. Those who support this perspective do so either because they believe the curriculum is generally adequate and can handle new teaching techniques or because they believe the digital applications will spark needed evolutionary changes to the status quo. The experience with computers in the schools over the past three decades does not encourage optimism that such an evolution will occur unless there are explicit actions to generate the more substantial change.

Isn't it reasonable to expect that schools should be compatible with the world of information, knowledge, communications, and collaboration?

The third theme involving Web 2.0 is the "progress theme," or the discontinuous-change or disruptive-technology point of view that has received lots of attention following last year's publication of the book *Disrupting Class.* This orientation does not derive from a sense that schools recently have become worse, but rather that schools need to change in order to become compatible with a changed world. Disruptive change represents a break with the way an organization structures policies, practices, roles, and rules. Rather than moving further and faster along an existing path, disruptive change puts the organization on a new path and transforms it.

Jenkins has identified the core media-literacy skills that young people need to acquire (see page 9). While students may acquire some of these skills outside of school, it would be unfortunate if schools opt out of cultivating the very skills their students need to succeed in today's global society. It is only when the new skills our young people require are integrated into an environment that embodies the nature and spirit of participation that these skills can be adequately cultivated. Attempts to graft them onto conventional schooling, however, can only result in a rather distant approximation of what our kids need from their schools.

The three themes outlined above are not mutually exclusive. For the most part, school personnel manifest some degree of all of these themes in their work. Generally speaking, all teachers see a need for students to be protected—or even better, to be able to protect themselves—from the pernicious aspects of the Web. Many teachers are making use of the Web—some in ways that are oriented to a preservationist approach and others that are more oriented to a transformative perspective. Either way, the task of taking advantage of Web 2.0 in schools raises thorny problems.

What Stands in Our Way?

I am the principal investigator of a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation project at the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) called Schools and Participatory Culture: Overcoming Organizational and Policy Barriers. The goal is to get a deeper understanding of the perspectives and practices of school administrators as a basis for providing support for school districts in their efforts to deal with the problems and seize the opportunities that new media brings to us. We expect to be working with MacArthur grantees whose work is relevant to schools, other educational organizations, and school districts in implementing a plan of action to help schools make better use of digital media resources. The following list is illustrative of the issues we face as we work to bridge the two-culture problem.

- **Networking.** At first glance, the connectivity statistics look quite good. The U.S. Department of Education reports that, as of 2003, 85 percent of schools were connected to the Internet with broadband. But there are two things that make the reality a lot less impressive than it sounds. First, a school is considered "connected" if there is at least one computer that is connected, and that might be a computer on the principal's desk. Second, connectivity tells us little about functional capability. A 2008 report by the State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA) indicated that most schools are connected at T1 speeds (1.54 Mbps), while the average household has broadband connection at or exceeding 5 Mbps. There are relatively few school districts in the U.S. that have adequate broadband connectivity to enable a full measure of access to Web 2.0 resources.

- **Hardware.** As of the 2005–06 school year, there were 14.2 million computers in U.S. schools (a 1:4 student-to-computer ratio). Once again, the statistics make the situation look better than it is. The data on hardware in schools is self-reported and may take into account every computer in the school—whether they are working or accessible to students. Apart from schools that have a one-to-one student computer program, schools where access to hardware is a constraining factor represent the overwhelming majority.

- **Filtering.** Were filtering to go away as a federal mandate, it is likely that many schools would keep a filter program on their servers. Districts have latitude in how they implement Web filtering and how they handle problems that occur when the server blocks a website that ought not be blocked. Thus, school districts vary considerably in how much of a problem filtering presents to teachers who make abundant use of the Internet. Rather than fight a losing battle to abolish filtering, it is more useful to help schools devise reasonable policies and procedures for filtering to enable teachers and students to use the Internet for good purposes.

- **Mobile Devices.** Many schools restrict students from using their cell phones. First is the concern that cell phones will be used to call friends, to surf websites, or for other distractions from learning. Second is the concern about accessing pornography or other bad sites, since the student's cell phone is not subject to the district Internet filter. If we really seek to bridge the two-culture gap, it seems reasonable to explore how the use of students' own connective appliances could be made safe and sane for their in-school learning.

- **Parental/Citizen Concerns.** Any effort to reconcile the world inside schools with the world outside of schools needs to be cognizant of the critical role of parents and the public. The viewpoints of parents and citizens about what they expect to happen with regard to formal education are central to any effort to foster institutional change. To the degree that what happens in schools is perceived by parents and citizens to be inappropriate, the capability of school leaders to make use of Web 2.0 resources is constrained.

Common Sense Media and the Joan Ganz Cooney Center recently collaborated on a parents' opinion survey on the role of digital media in the lives of their children. Eighty-three percent of parents said that knowing how to use digital media was as important to their children as learning

> Rather than fight a losing battle to abolish filtering, it is more useful to devise reasonable policies to enable teachers and students to use the Internet for good purposes.

traditional skills. But parents expressed skepticism about the value of many digital-media platforms, particularly when it came to whether digital media could teach kids how to communicate and collaborate, skills that are essential in a 21st-century workforce. Sixty-seven percent of parents said they did not think the Web helped teach their kids how to communicate, and 87 percent said they did not believe the Web helped their kids learn how to work with others.

The survey makes clear that there is considerable cognitive dissonance among parents with regard to digital media. They understand conceptually the value of these resources but are uneasy about their actual use. Any effort to expand the use of digital media needs to reach out to parents and citizens to explain and demonstrate the use and value of digital media in the school program.

- **Organizational/Professional Development.** There is a need for more and better professional development for teachers pertaining to the use of computers, the Internet, and Web 2.0. Yet there is no reason to expect that teachers who have acquired new capabilities will provoke changes in the organization. Even if the teachers who have adopted new concepts and skills are able to remain steadfast, their impact is likely to be felt only as long as they hold employment in the school. School reform requires direct and explicit reexamination of formal and informal policies, practices, roles, and rules by participants at all levels of the organization. Professional development needs to be an element of organizational development.
- **District-Level Leadership.** The CoSN MacArthur Project is focused on the involvement of superintendents, curriculum directors, and technology directors. Our focus in no way should suggest that teachers are less important in making the needed changes or that we endorse a top-down approach to school governance. There are many examples of teachers or schools moving forward on innovation without help from—or in some instances despite—district-level administration. Effective and sustainable deployment of Web 2.0 in schools can occur only when the good things happening in a particular classroom or campus are considered mainstream in the district, rather than an aberration. District-level administrators have a critical role in understanding what digital media means for learning, in providing leadership for efforts to make the effective use of media the rule rather than the exception, and in providing a policy context that is conducive to the best that schools can do to enrich learning with the resources.

Can We Get There from Here?

The challenges we face to assure that young people will be able to take full benefit from digital media within the learning environment of their schools are considerable. They are fiscal, ideological, and operational.

Given the nature of U.S. elementary and secondary schooling, it is unlikely that we will see uniformity in efforts to solve the problems or see a common profile with regard to the effective deployment of digital media in schools across the U.S. We are most likely to see considerable variation district by district in their willingness to take on the problems and in their degrees of success.

As we move forward, it is important to keep in mind that, while the effort to make good use of digital media and Web 2.0 in our schools brings with it many problems, digital media is not a problem. It is an opportunity. The family of projects being sponsored by the MacArthur Digital Media and Learning program, as well as similar work occurring around the world, demonstrates the incredible opportunities we have to provide valuable learning experiences for our youth both in school and out of school. Thus, we face the challenges not with a sense of burden but with a sense of privilege to be able to bring these learning resources to our kids. ● ● ●

James Bosco is a professor emeritus in the department of educational studies at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Mich. He is the principal investigator for a MacArthur Foundation project titled Schools and Participatory Culture: Overcoming Organizational and Policy Barriers. Bosco has held various administrative positions at Western Michigan University. His early work in educational technology focused on the design, development, and evaluation of interactive video learning applications.

R E S O U R C E S

Christensen, Clayton M., Curtis W. Johnson, and Michael B. Horn. *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns.* McGraw-Hill, 2008.

"Creating and Connecting/Research and Guidelines on Online Social—and Educational—Networking." National School Boards Association, July 2007. www.nsba.org/site/docs/41400/41340.pdf

Lenhart, Amanda and Mary Madden. "Pew Internet Project Data Memo: Social Networking Websites and Teens: An Overview." Pew Internet & American Life Project, January 2007. www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2007/Social-Networking-Websites-and-Teens.aspx

Lenhart, Amanda, Mary Madden, Aaron Smith, and Alexandra Macgill. "Teens and Social Media." Pew Internet & American Life Project, December 2007. www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2007/Teens-and-Social-Media.aspx

SETDA (State Educational Technology Directors Association). www.setda.org

Shuler, Carly. "Pockets of Potential: Using Mobile Technologies to Promote Children's Learning." The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop, January 2009. www.joanganzcooneycenter.org/pdf/pockets_of_potential_ExecSum.pdf