



Viewpoint

The K-12 Web 2.0 Debate: Learning to Communicate

- By Ruth Reynard
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While there is quite a lot being written about Web 2.0 tools and how they can increase opportunities for students to engage with content, their peers, and teachers, more must be explored in terms of the skill benefits to students when these tools are used effectively. For example, reference has been made in current writing to such skills as collaboration, networking, and critical thinking as direct benefits for students. However, teaching practitioners are becoming more sophisticated in recognizing levels of learning within those skill development areas.

An example of this is the general skill of communication and the obvious benefit to the learning process with heightened use of digital communication tools.

What is not so obvious but is becoming apparent is that within the general concept of communication, students can develop these skills differently and for different purposes with increased use of Web 2.0 tools. So, while we explore how Web 2.0 tools can assist in direct connection between individuals in the learning process, we must also explore how those connections build and expand students' ability to communicate effectively in various contexts and for various purposes. Good communication is central to good education, and teachers have long since been aware of the importance of teaching students how and when to use various language forms and to what purpose. With the use of Web 2.0 tools, the various forms and purposes of language use are clearly evident as they are central to actual tool choice. Additionally, and consistent with ongoing language use in general, what is viewed as "regular" constantly changes. Now, with the use of Web 2.0 tools that require language use for specific purposes, those changes are more rapid and pose continual challenges to K-12 teachers.

Teaching 101

The very basis of good teaching is effective communication, not only from the teacher's point of view, but from the student's as well. That is, in whatever context one decides to teach, one must be able to communicate clearly in the language of the students in one's class.

If we refer to this in terms of foreign language learning, the idea is obvious. If I travel overseas to teach, I must be prepared to learn the language of the people with whom I will engage in the classroom.

Not so obvious, however, is the idea that language differences are not only those of linguistic codes and grammar, but socio-linguistic overtones and undertones that are present in the applied use of any language. These are much harder to learn and recognize, yet they make a great difference in how someone's language is recognized as fluent and relevant ... or isn't.

For this generation and future generations of students, new technology has changed and continues to change

the socio-cultural and socio-linguistic forms of the any language code. As such, students and teachers can often speak different languages within the same communicative context and thus be incomprehensible to each other. Much of this change has occurred through the immediacy of the technology and the continuous connectivity available to students through mobile and Internet technology. For example, social networking tools are not just something that people use, but they are actually changing how communities are created, sustained, and managed. Also, what is changing are the linguistic codes of appropriateness, collaboration, and collective voice used in those processes of growth. Therefore, if these tools are marginalized from the mainstream of education as some commentators would suggest will always be the case, these communication changes cannot be incorporated into the learning environment and meaning exchange will be diminished in much the same way as two individuals speaking completely different languages.

More important and even more difficult to sustain are the cultural differences represented in the different uses of the language. Thus the critical pedagogies and linguistics that have often referred to cultural diversity and inclusiveness in teaching methods (Simon, 1992; Nieto, 2002) in terms of language, race, gender, etc. have now new relevance in the context of generational differences as a result of new technology. As Nieto (2002) said:

Whether teaching in a large urban public school system, a small rural schoolhouse, or an affluent private academy in the suburbs, all teachers today face students who are more diverse than ever before in terms of race, culture, and ethnicity, language background, social class, and other differences. (preface)

I would suggest that while there may be obvious differences in direct access to technology, the ubiquitous nature of new technology has created a challenge to all teachers in our culture as they face students who have been and continue to be increasingly socialized and informed digitally.

Of course, it could be argued that school must be about standardization and students learning "correct" communication rather than being reflective of common practice and use. While there may be some validity to this idea, it cannot be the motivation for all communication in school. That is, if teachers want to have a message communicated clearly and instantly to students, it is in their best interest to use language that is relevant and recognizable to students. Additionally, it is also in their best interest to use tools that maximize the connection and lower the time factor involved.

Styles of Communication

As well as the kinds of changes that socially and culturally take place through changes in language use, teachers would agree that there are various styles of communication that individual students seem to personalize as well as styles of communication that are appropriate in certain contexts of use. The following are some examples of these:

- **Direct communication.** Communicating directly with another person requires a certain style and approach. Some students prefer this kind of communication in every instance, but it is the teacher's responsibility to help students understand when and how to use a direct communication style effectively.
- **Indirect communication.** Similarly, indirect communication styles have specific contexts of use. When these are not adhered to, communication in this style can seem vague and ineffective.
- **Collective/reporting.** While communication can take place from a single voice, it can also take place from a collective voice when, for example, a viewpoint or analysis or summary has evolved from the work or input of various sources. While the message may be transmitted in a unified form, the "voice"

is collective.

- **Intentional/unintentional.** Communication can also be an intentional or an unintentional process. That is, words, phrases, sentences, can be formulated with great details and purpose such as in a speech or lecture. Much is also, however, communicated unintentionally through non-verbal communications or implication.

Digital Communication

While all of the above forms of communication are familiar to teachers already and do not relate to the use of technology, communication in and for the digital world includes much more. In the digital world, graphics are just as communicative as words, and sounds and integrated media bring together creative art, digital editing, and multidimensional production. So communication is becoming much more complex.

Additionally, modes of communication such as cell phones have led to the challenge of meaning being condensed into the smallest parts of language. Full sentences are no longer required in order to transmit textual meaning. Therefore, the merging of visual and textual communication has produced a kind of communication that requires visual implication within literal words. The words themselves become shortened and even coded into symbolic letters.

Of course, teachers are truly concerned about this movement in language as it appears to be an assault on "good language," and teachers will exclude the technology as a means to control the language used. Instead, students are often silenced and disempowered as they cannot feel free to integrate their world and how they perceive that world to be into their learning experience. Therefore Rather than Dewey's (1916) notion of experiential learning, we are moving back into an autocratic mode of content delivery in an attempt to control communication itself.

New Rules for Engagement

What might be some of the characteristics, then, of these linguistic changes that are taking place and that alter the entire process of communication?

The basis of what I propose here is no different from what linguists have told us for many years: Language and communication are basic to human interaction and the exchange of meaning. It is, therefore, a very important element of any school classroom. Additionally, linguists and cognitive psychologists have told us that thinking is inextricably linked to language, as we could not decipher our own thoughts without knowing language.

That said, what is it about that digitally inspired exchange of language that is currently changing and altering the rules we use in order to generally converse, dialog, and respond?

One such change is that appropriateness is now customized in terms of the social use of language within digital environments. That is, the digital communities themselves dictate the appropriateness of the language of their members. Additionally, while letter-based codes of meaning are used rather than conventional units such as words and phrases, if understood, they are legitimate. The direct challenge to teachers is not to diminish the codified meaning exchange but to reestablish the lines of demarcation between digital and non-digital environments. However, teachers should also keep in mind that those lines may change more quickly than ever before as the distinctions between digital and non-digital keep moving.

So while teachers are challenged to stay relevant yet rigorous in their expectations of students, teachers must also become even more sophisticated in what is real for their students. While some individuals will never see their digital and non-digital worlds merge, for current and future generations of students that process has

already taken place.

Our challenge as teachers is to remain current and become culturally intelligent about language changes and how meaning is exchanged, yet still prepare students well for the "norms" of generic societal and professional language use that still exist, realizing that those standards will continually expand and modify as far as language is concerned particularly within the realities of digital communication.

References

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John Dewey, (1916) *Democracy and Education*. The Macmillan Co. Copyright renewed 1944 John Dewey. HTML markup copyright 1994 ILT Digital Classics.

About the Author

Ruth Reynard is the dean of faculty services for Career Education Corp. She can be reached at rreynard@careered.com.