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Top 10 Web 2.0 Tools for Young Learners

by Chris Riedel

Gail Lovely is adamant about the nature and potential of Web-based learning tools. "Web 2.0 is about trust," she said at a recent talk. "It's about sharing and collaborating." And, she insisted, it's about putting the power to learn and create in the hands of the students.

Technology needs to trickle up, she said, not down. We need to give the most powerful tools to the most vulnerable populations because they are the ones who need it. "Young learners, non-readers," she continued, "need high-speed access, they need animation and graphics and sound. And that's the truth."

According to Lovely, an education technology consultant and speaker at the FETC 2009 conference in Orlando, FL in January, it was the recognition of those needs that led her to develop a "top 10 list" of go-to technology tools to help inspire young students and empower under-funded teachers. "The important thing to remember here," she said, "is that this isn't about simply providing you with 10 links. It's much more important to ask, 'What are you going to do with these things? How are you going to use these tools?' That's why we're here," she said. "So I can show you not only what's out there but also how other educators are using these resources to teach their students right now."

10. Kerpoof

Kerpoof is a site that provides a variety of creative tools for animation, drawing, and movie creation. Users can choose from a range of preset characters and environmental options, or they can create their own. The site offers drag-and-drop simplicity coupled with advanced animation and editing capabilities that, according to Lovely, open the platform up to a range of curricular applications.

9. Voki

No. 9 on the list is Voki, a text to speech generator that, according to Lovely, has a lot of very interesting applications. "This is more than just something cute that can be embedded in a Web site," she said, referring to the animated figure being projected on the screen. "What if the Voki was reading a list of spelling words? What if it was speaking another language? What if I had a Web site that had a Voki embedded to tell my kids what was going on so that the one's that couldn't read could hear it? What if kids used Voki to say something important?"

The site offers a high level of customization ranging from the overall look of the Voki to the sound of its voice. But, Lovely warned, "as with all tools, there has to be a task and a deadline." Let them play with it once, she said, and then have them get to work.

8. Create-A-Graph

"This may be an odd choice for the list," Lovely conceded as she revealed her No. 8 pick, "because, in some ways, it's not really Web 2.0. It's not quite as collaborative as some of these other tools. But if you want to cut to the chase and teach kids about creating graphs and reading data, this is a great tool."

Create-A-Graph is a Web-based tool aimed at giving students an accessible way to learn graphing fundamentals. The tool is easy and flexible, according to Lovely, and allows them to learn important concepts using their own information.

7. Yack Pack

Coming in at No. 7 on Lovely's list was "Yack Pack," an Internet-based voice communication tool that works a lot like voicemail for the Web. Users define a "pack"--a group of individuals they want to communicate with--and then record messages for the group, an individual, or even a subset within the group using a standard computer microphone. When members of the pack log in, they can listen and respond to the messages.

Using Yack Pack Live--a component of Yack Pack--users have the added ability of broadcasting their messages in real time using a small widget that can be embedded in a website. Uses of the platform, said Lovely, include multi-class collaboration, or even parent-teacher communications.

6. Animoto

Animoto is an automated presentation generator that focuses on using images to communicate a message. "This tool is great for class collaboration," said Lovely, and it is easier than using PowerPoint.

Two versions of the platform are currently available: a paid version for general public use and a free education version offering unlimited use for teachers and students.

5. Skype

This tool, according to Lovely, not only has the potential to improve class participation and collaboration, but it can also help cut costs by providing free voice and video calling to other Skype users worldwide. Some uses of the platform include multi-class and cross-district collaboration, professional development, and virtual field trips.

4. Glogster

While referred to as an "interactive poster," Glogster--Lovely's No. 4 pick--is, in effect, a personal Web page complete with embedded media links, sound, and video capabilities. Students can work with Glogster individually or as a group to create presentations, share information, and interact with their peers. Lovely stressed the importance of signing up for the "EDU" version, which prevents other users from viewing class-specific "Glogs."

3. Voicethread

Coming in at No. 3, Voicethread is audiovisual tool that gives users the ability to upload images or video files and then add audio or text comments. "The power of this," said Lovely, "is in the commenting."

2. Blogs

Nearing the top of the list, the versatility of blogs, said Lovely, is what makes them so valuable. Blogs provide opportunities to reach out to a range of community stakeholders including administrators, other teachers and students, parents, and the community at large. "Blogs have the power to give kids an authentic audience," she said. "It gives them a voice."

1. Wikis

Lovely rounded out her top 10 with Wikis and Wiki platforms, citing these as the most powerful of the Web 2.0 tools. "Wikis," she said, "are even more versatile than blogs. You can do anything with a Wiki," from embedding all kinds of content to promoting collaboration to creating an entire community all on a single platform. "In fact," she said, pointing to her presentation slides on the giant screen behind her, "You've been looking at a wiki this whole time during our discussion."

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