Storytelling in the Web 2.0 Era

By Glen Bull

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The emergence of the Web 2.0 era is altering the social, commercial, and political landscapes. It is providing opportunities for citizen participation and social connections in ways that also offer new possibilities for education.

The term Web 2.0 encompasses both technological advances and user participation facilitated by these advances. Technology publisher Tim O'Reilly popularized the term and identified key attributes:

Web as a Platform. The first and most important advance is that it is now possible to develop lightweight applications that use the Web as a platform. Consequently, small teams of one or two individuals can develop applications used within a Web browser, which has resulted in more applications and triggered an explosion in creativity. New business models are emerging that offer many of these applications at no cost to the user.

User-generated Content. The decreased cost and increased accessibility has lowered barriers to authorship, triggering a secondary effect—production of media of all kinds by users. User-generated content is reflected in text formats (Blogger), photo sharing (Flickr), audio (podcasts), video sharing (YouTube), and social spaces (MySpace).

Sharing and Re-mixing. Proliferation of user-generated media produced a third effect—a culture of sharing and remixing. Because the media produced is visible and available on the Web, it has become common to appropriate elements of other media and remix them to form a new work. Thus, bloggers commonly link to and quote from one another's works. Audio, images, and video are similarly being remixed and embedded in other works.

Economic and Educational Value. Content has always been the primary asset of media companies and publishers. In the Web 2.0 environment, users contribute content in return for use of applications and storage space. At the same time, the cost of online disk storage has dropped dramatically. The content generated by users creates economic value for Web 2.0 developers.

The rise of YouTube illustrates all four trends. Three friends conceived the concept in 2005. By 2006 users were watching millions of videos per day. Later that year Google acquired YouTube primarily for the value of content contributed by users.

Web 2.0 Storytelling

The ease of development combined with the economic value of user-contributed content has fueled advances in Web 2.0 tools, which in turn yields benefits for educators. The dramatic way in which this has created educational opportunities is illustrated by a storytelling demonstration by Alan Levine.

He was struck by the proliferation of Web tools that can be used to create a story. As an exercise, he produced the same digital story (about his dog Dominoe) using 50 different Web 2.0 storytelling tools.

All of the storytelling tools selected for this exercise are Web based and free. Consequently, they are available for any educator to use. They allow at least two or more types of media—text, images, sound, video, and animation—to be combined to tell a story that can be shared via the Web. The majority of the tools allow the stories to be embedded on an external Web site, blog, or social space.

The story of Dominoe the Dalmation told with 50 different Web 2.0 storytelling tools.

Some of these tools have been discussed in past Connected Classroom columns, but many more are featured in this demonstration. One of the benefits of creating the same story in so many different environments is that categories of Web 2.0 storytelling tools begin to emerge. Some of the categories Levine suggested include:

1. Slideshow Tools
2. Time line Tools
3. Mapping Tools
4. Comic Tools
5. Scrapbook Tools
6. Media Tools (Audio & Video)
7. Mixer Tools

Different categories of tools may prove to be particularly useful in different subjects and disciplines. For example, time line tools may prove to be particularly useful in social studies, facilitating storytelling that arranges events in chronological order. Levine recommends Xtimeline as a tool that is particularly well designed.

Similarly, mapping tools (discussed in the August 2007 Connected Class-room column) facilitate creation of stories that take place across a geographic area. The Google mapping tool is both powerful and relatively easy to use. A time line tool and a mapping tool can be used to tell the same story from two different perspectives.

Comic creation tools are another category of tools that can be used to tell stories. Toondo is one of the more popular Web-based comic creation tools. Graphic novels are changing the face of media, and school librarians have noted the strong interest that this genre has attracted. Consequently, many teachers are now beginning to explore ways in which these tools can be used to facilitate student-created stories.

Media tools facilitate stories told primarily through the medium of audio or video, while a special category that Levine calls "Mixer Tools" allows a wide variety of media to be combined to tell non-linear stories that sometimes allow others to comment and annotate the stories as well. For example, VoiceThread supports creation of online media albums that allow others to contribute shared text or audio comments. The developers suggest that a VoiceThread can allow "an entire group's story to be told and collected in one place."

Educational Affordances

Most school systems have constrained software budgets. An audit of installed software reveals a limited number of educational programs in many instances. The Web 2.0 era now provides a wide range of software available at no cost to schools. Because applications and work are available on the Web, students can continue to develop projects at home or on computers in the library or other public sites after school.

The 50 storytelling applications highlighted by Levine are just the tip of the iceberg. By the time this column appears, many more Web 2.0 media applications will be available for use. *L&L*'s editor, Kate Conley, points to sites such as TechCrunch that catalog dozens of new Web 2.0 applications each week.

Employing these new capabilities in ways that enhance learning will require thoughtful integration. Pavio's dual coding theory suggests that verbal and visual systems coexist in the mind and that employing both visual and verbal information may facilitate learning. The National Reading Panel has cited instructional imaging techniques as among the more promising ways of fostering comprehension development. Emerging Web 2.0 tools will provide new opportunities to do this.

Resources
Blogger: http://www.blogger.com
Dominoe the Dalmation: http://cogdogroo.
    wikispaces.com/StoryTools
Flickr: http://www.flickr.com
Google Maps: http://maps.google.com
MySpace: http://www.myspace.com
TechCrunch: http://www.techcrunch.com
Toondo: http://www.toondo.com
VoiceThread: http://voicethread.com
Xtimeline: http://xtimeline.com
YouTube: http://www.youtube.com