Educational Networking:
The important role Web 2.0 will play in education

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Overview/Introduction

We've been waiting a long time for computers to dramatically change education, but for the most part, that promise remains unfulfilled. Unlike in the business world, where the computer quickly became a fixture on every desk and transformed both day-to-day tasks and the business landscape as a whole, computers have not transformed the goals of educators, or even the methods used to achieve those goals.

There are a lot of reasons that this is so — legal, financial, and cultural — but I believe that the bottom line is that there hasn't been a computer application that so universally changes things that we stop seeing computers as an add-on, and start seeing them as integral to the full educational process. The spreadsheet, the word processor, and email served this seminal role in the business world; it's hard to imagine doing business without them. But take the computer out of most schools and classrooms, and the instruction wouldn't change much. Admittedly, traditional software tools on computers can be very helpful in the educational setting — it is easier to correct drafts written in a word processor — but they aren't at the core of the educational process, transforming the process of teaching and learning.

Intuitively, though, we have felt that the computer would bring real change, and the fact that it hasn't has puzzled many of us. The advent of the Internet, however, and in particular what we are calling "Web 2.0," has so significantly changed our relationship to information and our own personal learning opportunities outside of formal education, that we're beginning to see a set of software tools emerge that are profoundly altering both learning processes and outcomes. These tools allow us to see the start of a radical evolution in education that will bring such dramatic changes that we'll soon be at a point where we won't be able to imagine education without them.

What makes this coming transformation both so fascinating and so compellingly logical is the way in which the Web has changed our personal learning opportunities. I can remember as a child riding my bike to the library or the bookstore so I could read about whatever topic was of interest to me at the time. And while it seemed that there was always more to read than I had the time for, that information landscape now seems amazingly limited in light of the Internet's ability to bring us so much information, almost without regard for time, place or even cost. By just lowering the barriers to accessing information, however, the Internet did not dramatically change life for most of us. It was not until we began to participate in creating that information that something amazing happened. A world began emerge in which "we" (or people like us) were creators. We could start a blog; we could upload and share photos and videos; we could even build an encyclopedia.

The technology that took this amazing change and multiplied it ten-fold, and how it's impacting the world of education, is an underlying theme of this paper, which will range across social networking, Web 2.0, the emergence of educational networking, and what I see as the first real area of significant adoption for educational networking: professional development for educators. We'll also take a look at Elluminate's LearnCentral offering, |an exciting new platform for professional development in education.

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Social — and Educational — Networking

It's important to acknowledge up front that, while the phrase "social networking" has a history that predates the Internet, for most people the term retains a specific connotation of a certain kind of website — MySpace, Facebook, and the like. Social networking sites have worried many educators (and parents) because they often bring with them outcomes that are not positive: narcissism, gossip, wasted time, "friending," hurt feelings, ruined reputations, and sometimes unsavory, even dangerous, activities. It seems likely that the phrase "social networking" carries so much baggage that it would actually impede its productive use in the context of education.

For many people, then, it may come as a surprise, that there is actually nothing inherently negative about the technology that's the basis for social networking. Social networking sites, at their core, are just aggregations of a set of Web 2.0 building blocks — forums, directories, "friending," chat, etc. Just as you can build either a casino or a school with basic construction materials, the materials are not the issue. It's the end use for which they are assembled and fitted. The first sites that were constructed using Web 2.0 building blocks were, as often as not, "casino-like," leading to the impression that social networking was a time waster at best, and an unsafe place to be at worst.

But there's no reason why the same building blocks that built those social networking "casinos" can't be used to create schools, libraries, meeting halls, teachers' lounges — which is exactly what we're starting to see happening today. It's even arguable that these building blocks are more effective as educational tools than as social ones. Therefore, to help alleviate any confusion or negative preconception, throughout this paper I'll use the term "educational networking" instead of social networking when I'm specifically calling out the educational value and use of Web 2.0 technology.

The other reason why I'll use the phrase "educational networking" is that the hybrid form of social networking that is being built for education is actually different than the direction that public "social networks" are likely to take. The combination of social networking technologies with the learning tools of online teaching platforms, like Elluminate, will create a distinct use of technology which merits its own designation.

Web 2.0: A Perfect Fit for Educators

Social and educational networking both come to us courtesy of Web 2.0. For a number of reasons, I believe that Web 2.0 is the perfect environment for educators, which is why forward-thinking school systems and academic institutions are working hard to make it a part of their practices. This new web is going to dramatically alter the 21st century landscape in education, shaping how students approach learning, how educators approach teaching, and, increasingly, how educators are interacting with, and learning from, each other.

Web 2.0 plays to the strengths of educators — curiosity and love of learning — by opening the doors to collaboration and participation. It encourages and facilitates the natural desire to share what you know and to learn from your colleagues. And fully embracing

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Web 2.0 Building Blocks

Here's a brief round-up of the features, or tools, that comprise Web 2.0, and are commonly found in social and educational networks. By looking at them within the context of education, their usefulness for teaching and learning are pretty dramatically apparent.

Profile Page: In educational networking, the profile page is a purposeful representation of who you are that provides tangible and identifiable benefits to professional connecting. Not only does the profile page fulfill some of the tasks that a résumé would, but also provides a portal view to the content you've created or participated in on the network, becoming a dynamic e-portfolio.

Friending: While "friending" can have a terrible connotation, if you think "colleague this quickly fall away. Now you have professional colleagues, and, if it's not quite the same as eating lunch with your fellow teachers each day in the teachers' lounge, your online colleagues may be more likely to share your direct interests and understand your specific challenges.

Forums: One of the great features that Ning networks strengthened was the discussion forum, through which discussions could take place over time (asynchronously) and were threaded (making them easy to read and follow). Having conversations gathered in one place where they're easy to read and search takes discussion forums to a new level and often makes them the heart of an educational network.

Web 2.0 is a logical extension of the attempts that so many educators have made to use the Internet to connect, collaborate, and create since the first days of bulletin boards and listserves. So for many educators, it's an incredibly exciting time. But it may also be confusing and even intimidating to a larger number. My purpose here is to offer some clarity around the confusion, and, more importantly, explain why the excitement around Web 2.0 is not just a passing fad, but is grounded in the deep roots of how we learn.

Web 2.0: An Information Revolution

So just what is Web 2.0, and what makes it so important?

I'll start off by talking a bit about the way we first used the World Wide Web, or "Web 1.0." When we first began using the Web, we used it to expand, but mirror, our experiences with the traditional information world of print and broadcast media. Of course, this was still a significant shift in the dissemination of information, dramatically extending the amount we had access to. However, most of us were still just the "audience," using the Internet for the web version of the Three R's: Reading, Receiving, Researching. A small minority of users began to create content using web publishing programs, bulletin boards, and listserves, but the barriers were high enough that most of us remained passive consumers of information from authoritative sources.

Then, thanks to broadband, improved browser technologies, and other technical leaps, our experiences with the Web began to change. For many, it was the subtle but unmistakable shift exemplified by the Amazon.com experience, where the "amateur" comments of other readers about books became more compelling than the "authoritative" information provided by publishers. In fact, it was the desire to understand why Amazon and certain other Web companies had survived the dot-com meltdown that led publisher Tim O'Reilly to coin the term "Web 2.0." While the definition given at the time was technical and largely grounded in a discussion of the underlying technologies, the message turned out to actually be very simple: Web 2.0 sites created the framework for user participation, where a site's primary content was contributed by its users. In retrospect, this shift changed everything. Web 2.0 has moved the Internet from our traditional one-way information flow to a two-way "conversation" in which the Three R's have been supplanted by the Three C's: Contributing, Collaborating, Creating — through mediums like blogs, wikis, and twittering.

Certainly, Web 2.0 has opened the flood gate of a dam on creativity that we weren't even fully aware existed, and the explosion of content creation is an indication of the latent energy that's released when anyone and everyone is able to participate more actively in the different spheres of their lives.

Yet for many educators, because of privacy, professional, and boundary concerns, there was an understandable and even appropriate inclination to view the social networking that Web 2.0 fostered with skepticism. These concerns masked the amazing potential that social networking technologies had to offer, and we've only recently started to get over them as the educational networking success stories begin to emerge. Now, educational networks are, bar none, the most likely Web platform for facilitating Contributing, Collaborating, and Connecting in the meaningful way that educators have always looked for.

Using Web 2.0 for Educational Networking: Ning and Classroom 2.0

Many of you, no doubt, have some familiarity with Ning, and/or with Classroom 2.0, the educational network I founded. Ning began life as a general purpose development platform for Web services, but in early 2007 it changed its model to focus on allowing users to start their own social networks. Shortly after this, I started Classroom 2.0, a social network for educators interested in the use of Web 2.0 in education. In fact, the goal of Classroom 2.0 was to provide educators themselves with an ability to quickly see how personally transformative it could be to build or be a part of a personal learning network online.

Classroom 2.0 began to blossom fast, and the excitement it engendered was very real. (The network has grown to tens of thousands of members.) Based on the success of Classroom 2.0, Ning brought me on to evangelize the educational use of their product, which I did for eighteen months. I believe that this helped to promote a rapid expansion in the use of Ning for educational purposes, and there are currently hundreds upon hundreds of vibrant educational networks on Ning.

The creativity, the willingness to reach out for help, the desire to share that I see in these other networks and in Classroom 2.0 are awe-inspiring, and are in large part the basis for my belief that educational networking is the face of the future. Nowhere, I think, will it be more inherently valuable for education than in the realm of professional development.

24/7 Professional Development

Through educational networking, educators are able to have a 24x7 online experience not unlike the rich connecting and sharing that have typically been reserved for special-interest conferences — except that geography is no longer a constraint, the critical mass of interest needed can be much lower, and the time and cost to participate (both for the teacher and the school) are both affordable. With educational networking, educators can participate in a conference at their own time, place, and pace. As long as they have access to the Internet, they're there. Imagine middle-school Latin teachers, or those interested in the music of the Civil War, being able to meet, collaborate, and share ideas and resources with each other on a regular basis. Even if a conference for middle-school Latin teachers, or Civil War music teachers, were to be held, the time and travel costs would typically preclude it from happening very often. But online, with virtual meetings, the frequency and regularity of convening is limited only by the desire of those interested in a topic.

With educational networking, too, there's a higher probability that:

1. Educators will be able to participate in the events that will actually make a difference for them, their students, and their institutions.
2. Continuous learning can be encouraged and accomplished.
3. Staff members or administrators who are prohibited by law or policy from leaving their facility (as is often the case for principals) can still participate in a robust set of professional development opportunities.
4. Changing regulations, requirements, standards, and best practices can be kept up with.
5. Educators will be able to meet the demands for customized approaches that meet the specific needs and learning styles of all of their students.

Given the costs of organizing and managing professional development meetings, you're not likely to hold regular meetings around very specific topic areas that may only attract a handful to an event — yet may be of vital interest and importance to the educators involved in those areas.

Once professional development activities can be conducted online, and do not require many of the hard costs associated with physical events, discussions or meetings on more and more "specialty" curricular topics are going to take place — to the great benefit of both educators and their students.

Other benefits to educational networks have been identified by those who use them. Educational networks enable positive peer support and provide much needed encouragement. They keep teacher practices up to date, increase teaching time (vs. going off-site for professional development classes), and promote job satisfaction. In addition to the professional development opportunities from educational networking, we can also expect to see very tangible benefit to the profession of teaching as well, especially with new educators. In a profession that can be profoundly isolating and lonely even though teachers are in the midst of interacting with students all day, educational networking holds a significant key to improving opportunities to find both emotional support and support for exploring new ideas. Educational networking may, thus, prove crucial to teacher retention and recruitment strategies, especially those aimed at newly minted teachers, already used to social networking and its promise of continuous connection.

The power of educational networking to truly make a difference should help to bring about an entirely new world when it comes to professional development.

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Elluminate's LearnCentral™: Educational Networking Takes a Major Step Forward

By now, I hope I've laid the groundwork for seeing the potential to make educational networking an important environment for professional development. The next step is to recognize that the social networking tools that we have been morphing into educational networking have not specifically been designed for this use. Now it's time to start adding new technologies and tools that speak specifically to the needs of educators. From my own direct experiences with Classroom 2.0 and other networks, it has been clear that there are several missing pieces in social networking that are needed for robust educational networking. I want to focus on three in particular, as they provide the greatest opportunity for immediate results and have been the focus of our development work for LearnCentral™, a new social learning network where educators can connect with colleagues, share content, build online portfolios, access resources, attend events, and collaborate in real-time. LearnCentral is sponsored by Elluminate, where I serve as the Social Learning Consultant. The missing pieces that LearnCentral fills in are:

1. The ability to collaborate with others synchronously as well as asynchronously.
2. The ability to create a personal profile built specifically around educational and curricular specialties and interests, making it easy to find other people, resources, events, and discussions around that same categorization scheme.
3. The ability to easily find store, manage, and share content.

These three features now begin to define educational networking separately from social networking, and are at the heart of LearnCentral, so let's talk a bit more about them.

First, collaborating in real-time. One of the most powerful aspects of professional development is the give and take among participants — the delightful moment when several hands are raised at once by those wanting to make a point, when people care so intently about what each other is saying that the ideas start flowing like mad, or when the side conversations spill out into the hallways during the break. While the asynchronous nature of educational networking is important — how much easier it is to go back and review materials (and mull them over at your own pace) when they're continuously accessible online — when asynchronous learning is combined with synchronous tools, like Elluminate's web conferencing technology (part of LearnCentral), educators can have the best of both worlds: the immediacy and connections of in-person events with the sustained discussions that take place over time. (Every user of LearnCentral is automatically provisioned with a free, three-person Elluminate room for small meetings, office hours, or individual communication. A free public conference room is also available for larger events. In addition, easy integration is provided for those who have purchased Elluminate virtual classroom and web conferencing environments. Sessions can be fully recorded, so participants can go back over course materials after the fact, and have a far richer set of information to draw on that they would if they were solely relying on their own notes or marked up versions of PowerPoint slides. And with Elluminate, those who weren't able to attend sessions on schedule have an almost-as-good-as-being-there experience when they replay it and see the whiteboard jottings, the stream of instant messaging comments, and the participants' back and forth.

Second, the ability to easily search out and connect with those who share common needs and interests, which is extremely valuable to educators. As much as I love my Classroom 2.0 network, it's very hard to actually search for another educator through it. With generic social networking tools applied to education, it is possible to search for and find forums and other resources that appeal to like minded individuals, or to put queries out there in hopes that someone will respond, but these are not especially effective at really finding those with specifically common interests. By allowing individuals to categorize themselves and their contributions in an educational framework, LearnCentral supports both proactive searching by topic, geography, and teaching level — as well as helping to surface these connections regularly to the user for more serendipitous connecting.

Third, today's educational networking sites have a hit or miss approach to organizing and sharing content. LearnCentral's "portfolio" system is built around making it possible to store lesson plans, resource documents, photos, videos, presentations, or any other object in such a way that it's, first, a content filing system for an individual educator, and that it's, second, a way to make content available for others to use by also specifying the level of sharing (through the Creative Commons licensing system) that is allowed for that content. Those contributing content resources can categorize them by subject area and grade applicability, and also tag them for cross-search purposes.

All of these features of LearnCentral combine to create a network that utilizes the best features from the generic social networking sites and clearly shift the direction of development in a way that creates and defines the new model of educational networking. While educational networking has potential in a broad range of arenas, the most immediate and powerful use we see for the new LearnCentral platform is both formal and informal professional development.

LearnCentral, Private Community: Making It Your Own

Now for a bit of a pitch. While LearnCentral is free, and promises to be a very exciting forum for professional development, many administrators will want to consider LearnCentral Private Community, especially when it comes to formal professional development. LearnCentral Private Community has all the properties of LearnCentral that make it such a vast improvement over generic educational sites, but it adds important elements of privacy, personalization, and control.

With the Private Community, a school, school district, state education department, college, university, or association, can incorporate LearnCentral into their own site, and use their own logo and color scheme, branding their educational networking environment as their own. More important, while Private Community users can incorporate any and all content from the general purpose LearnCentral, they can define who has access to their own content, deciding what (if any) content can be used universally, what is private within specific groups within their own community, and anything in between. This is a tremendous advantage for those who want to maintain control over proprietary content and valuable intellectual property — and can also prevent the problem of over-sharing, when individuals unwittingly share licensed content with those outside the family. With Private Community, administrators can also govern content that may not meet their specific requirements or standards.

Pedagogical Value of Web 2.0 [continued]

Proactivity To keep up with today's pace of change, continuous education and lifetime learning are increasingly expected and required from all of us. When we can both contribute and believe that our contributions are making a difference, we are more likely to stop viewing ourselves as passive audiences, and more as genuine actors in the changing world of education.

Critical Thinking The vast amount of data on the Web requires more critical thinking than was needed when "trusted authorities" told us what we needed to know. Educators will need to shepherd students through the increasingly important task of filtering Web-based content and discerning whom and what to trust. The best way to prepare educators for this is for them to hone their critical thinking skills through educational networking and other web forums.

Personalized Learning Depending on particular needs, connections can be made to, and resources found for, very specific topics. While "teacher training" days may often be "one size fits all" activities, Web-based learning provides the platform for personalizing one's lifetime learning.

For a FREE
30-day Elluminate trial, visit
tinyurl.com/elluminate-free-trial

You can email me at
stevehargadon@elluminate.com

To learn more about LearnCentral, visit **learncentral.org**

For more information about LearnCentral Private Community, contact **sales@elluminate.com** or call **925.271.7750**

Private Community also lets an organization keep control over membership, while providing educators within their organization the ability to securely and easily make peer contacts (and friendships), so essential to professional development and teacher retention.

All told, Elluminate's LearnCentral will provide a top notch platform for professional development, and the Private Community will be especially beneficial when it comes to formal professional development.

See you online!

One of the amazing impacts of Web 2.0 for me is watching long-time educators have their own personal learning transformed by the new tools of Web participation—especially as they discover professional development venues on the Web that help to release the inclination to help others that so often prompted them to become teachers to begin with. Their own experiences with Web 2.0 in this regard dramatically shape new expectations for the types of opportunities they are going to take part in — and the types of opportunities they will provide for their students.

As noted, where we have seen immediate, and overwhelmingly positive, use of educational networking is in the professional development activities of educators, which has largely informed the writing of this document. Over time, educational networking will have many uses in and out of the classroom, uses that involve educators, students, parents, and others within the community.

As we move through the 21st century, it's essential that our educators themselves experience the Web 2.0 world in order to understand the cultural impact that it's having. Web 2.0, after all, is the lens through which their students will approach learning. Our most important technological tools reshape our expectations and change what's possible, and this is especially true of Web 2.0. I don't need a car, for example, to travel — I can walk. But when I have a car, it opens a new and exciting set of possibilities for me to magnify my travel potential. We don't have to be in the Web 2.0 world for the educational experiences to take place, but when we're there, the scope of what we can accomplish is greatly magnified. If we're serious about "No Teacher Left Behind," we have to be serious about the role that the Internet will play — and ensure that our educators are fully versed in Web 2.0.

Educational networking is allowing educators to both learn things — which traditional professional development has always afforded them — and to learn about Web 2.0, which is having such a profound impact on learning in the 21st century. Elluminate's LearnCentral is providing educators with the benefits (and excitement) of informal networking, along with that ability for organizations to formalize their approach to online professional development.

I hope I've held your attention long enough to have given you a glimpse of the tremendous opportunities ahead through educational networking. Should you have any ideas or questions, I hope you'll get in touch with me. I encourage all of you to sign up for LearnCentral. And if you're interested in talking to someone specifically about setting up LearnCentral Private Edition for professional development in your institution or system, the contact information is shown below.

Thanks, and see you online!