



The New WWW: Whatever, Whenever, Wherever

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In an age of instant media gratification, learning must be real, rich, and relevant. A new world of personalized, device-delivered digital content and functionality hovers just over the broadband horizon. The New WWW – offering us *whatever* we want, *whenever* and *wherever* we want it – may seem like just an extension of our already-technology-enhanced contemporary life. In some ways, it is. But such a wireless stream of media gratification is actually a radical departure from typical human experience. And as tantalizing as this ready access to our hearts' desires may be, it creates great challenges for our children. To counteract the New WWW's potentially harmful impact on youth, educators must use technology to create learning experiences that are real, rich, and relevant.

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What is the New WWW?

From Personal Computers to Personal Handheld Devices

Around the world, companies are rolling out a new kind of service that brings broadband power to mobile personal devices. Commonly known as *3rd Generation*, or *3G*, this upgrade in cellular networks means that any media will be able to stream easily to our devices in full motion, including all manner of television programs, movies, videoconferencing, music, and multi-user games. Next will come 4G, in which data rates are expected to be 100 times faster than those in this first 3G wave. As the delivery platform of broadband content and functionality shifts from computer to personal device, we will be surrounded by a multimedia aura that accompanies us wherever we go. In this way, the New WWW is unlike anything humans have yet experienced.

From Mass Production to Niche Market

The last economic revolution began when the assembly line enabled common folk to afford their very own interchangeable Ford Model T in “any color, so long as it’s black.” Visit the Ford Web site today, and you’ll find an interactive vehicle showroom that allows you to specify your preferred price range, body style, miles per gallon, and seating capacity and to select from such colors as Dark Stone, Estate Green, and Medium Wedgewood Blue. Point your browser to any Web portal, and you’re likely to encounter the pervasive *my-ification* of our age. My Yahoo! offers you the power to “customize the Internet!” (“You choose it – My Yahoo! brings it together!”) At Excite, you’ll find MyWeather, MyMovies, MyTV, MySign, MyLottery, MyPortfolio, and MyScores. Even real-world license plates advertise the name of the official Web portal of the state of Florida: “MyFlorida.com.”

Why this emphasis on serving the individual? According to Fiona Harvey (2000),

Businesses everywhere see the potential of the technology; connected consumers will be big, mobile wallets. The plan is that you’ll use your phone to spend money everywhere, all the time.

In the age of the New WWW, every instant of our waking lives becomes an opportunity to impulse-buy. See a chance for good seats at a concert if you act fast? Do it! Just remembered a film you’ve always wanted to see? Why not view it right now, as you sit stuck in rush-hour traffic? Unlike the buckshot approach of broadcast television (before TiVo), the New WWW knows what you want – and wants you to have it. Cheap. Right now.

Children and teens with mobile media devices are like kids in a candy shop. What choices do we expect them to make if their pockets are loaded with cash and the shelves bulge with penny candy – especially when there’s no parent in sight? The choice won’t be between *yes* and *no*, but between *what kind?* and *what next?* Maybe someone needs to watch over this New WWW.

The Pursuit of Happiness

What’s *really* wrong with this picture? Our concern is more than the hell-in-a-handbasket grumblings of the older generation; it has everything to do with loving children and wanting

them to be happy. Children believe that getting whatever they want will make them happy. As adults, we know otherwise.

The Real “Whatever”

Research conducted by Martin Seligman (2002) reveals that people typically use three strategies to chase happiness: pursuing pleasure, engaging in personally meaningful actions, and performing service to something larger than themselves. Only two work. Seligman has found that pursuing pleasure yields no statistically significant difference in subjects’ levels of happiness. Chasing after what we want doesn’t make us happy.

Need further proof? Look at the many high-profile examples of child actors and pop stars who *do* get everything they want: the best toys, coolest clothes, and most attractive companions. Sound great? Yet how many of these young people are happy, and how many are in rehab?

More than a century ago, William James provided a simple formula that suggests why having high expectations doesn’t necessarily lead to happiness. He said that self-esteem can be measured by the ratio between our *pretensions*, or expectations about what we will achieve, and our actual success (1890). When children and teenagers are full of MTV dreams and bombarded with Pixar peak experiences, their expectations of life sparkle with the extraordinary. Everyone’s going to be a pop star, a professional athlete, or at least a millionaire. Such unrealistic expectations can lead to a long downward spiral.

Who hasn’t heard that wrenching response so common among young people, the verbal shrug of complete apathy: “Whatever.” The premature disillusionment expressed by that word is the real *whatever* that comes from getting whatever we want, whenever and wherever we want it.

Driving Students to Distraction

Here’s a prediction: Within the next decade, a school district will be sued by the bereaved parents of a teenager who committed suicide. The parents will charge that school killed their child. Picture the heartbroken mother on the 6 o’clock news: “Joey was fine when he went to kindergarten. But over the years, the life went out of him. School bored him to death.”

Just like adults, young people who are stressed or bored frequently choose distraction over real life. The clinical manager of an addiction treatment service said, “The desire to escape the routine or stress of life is a reason people become addicted to the Internet” (Hall, 2003). Could the assembly-line approach so dominant in education actually “drive students to distraction”?

The point is not to blame parents or schools, but to sound a wake-up call: Unlimited, ubiquitous, personalized media gratification is unlike anything we’ve ever had to contend with, and just letting it happen isn’t a good idea. Envision the horror and glory of getting whatever we want, whenever and wherever we want it. Online gambling, panda cams, cam girls, hate groups, online fantasy role-playing games, the Worldwide Association of Seaweed Processors – it’s all there. All we have to do is choose.

A Better Approach for Education

Schools will have to make choices as well. Some will ban 3G devices in an attempt to avoid change. But we can and must do better. In fact, as educators, we are just the people who can help.

If we acknowledge that boredom and stress are leading our young people to get lost in the New WWW, we must also acknowledge that schools have too much of both. But the joy of learning has neither! One of the most powerful definitions of teaching I know comes from Maria Harris: “Teaching is the creation of a situation in which subjects, human subjects, are handed over to themselves” (1991, p. 33). No virtual stimulus can accomplish this.

Listening to MP3s doesn’t compare with playing your own music. Watching a DVD isn’t the same as producing your own film. Playing a video game pales in comparison to designing your own software. And let’s be honest – downloading pornography doesn’t stand a chance against a shy kiss.

How do educators help our students make truly satisfying choices? We can start by taking our cues from Seligman, James, and Harvey. We can “hand students over to themselves.” We can engage them in the joys of learning, of making meaning, of being part of something larger than themselves, of testing themselves against authentic challenges. We can shift them from passivity and consumption to action and creativity. And believe it or not, the New WWW can help us.

Just as the Web has empowered students to undermine pointless, rote “research assignments” through copy-and-paste masterpieces, the New WWW shifts learning power to the students themselves. When the world of information explodes beyond what one head can hold, who decides what gets into that head? When students can demonstrate their learning in a persuasive essay, a sardonic blog, a moving short film, a robust wiki entry, or a humorous podcast, why would we demand deadening conformity? The New WWW may do us all a favor and put assembly-line education out of its misery.

A Strategy for All Teachers in All Schools

Ten years ago, as a classroom teacher attempting to make learning real for students, I found that the Web transformed what was possible. To support rich integration of the Web into learning, I have worked since 1995 to develop the WebQuest as one consistent process to scaffold advanced learning (March, 2003-2004). Typical WebQuests might challenge students to evaluate the most promising combination of alternative energy sources, use online tools to reapportion the U.S. budget in line with their ideal national goals, or distinguish between terrorist acts and fights for freedom in a quest to reach a definition of terrorism that can apply cross-culturally.

Unfortunately, few schools or school systems have integrated the Web into schools in a way that makes real changes in teaching and learning. Experience working with teachers and school systems has revealed that using WebQuests – or the many other good strategies that are available to leverage the medium for authentic learning – is a stretch for most educators and learners.

Without widespread institutional support, the Web has been slow to make its way into most classrooms. Some Web-savvy teachers make it a practice to incorporate links to Web resources into their instructional units. Others go beyond that and design goal-based

authentic learning activities involving research with the Internet. A few engage their students in great WebQuests.

But to foster change in every classroom, every day, teachers need to find formats that are easier for every Web-connected teacher to integrate into the classroom. More and more teachers are venturing into one such format: They are creating class Web sites that go beyond homework lists and Web links to gather and share information about a topic of special interest to them.

I call this kind of Web site a *ClassAct Portal*: *Class* because the site involves a whole class of students; *Act* because it supports authentic, active learning; *ClassAct* because it provides a real-world forum for students to exercise their best efforts; and *Portal* because the site serves as a window to resources, information, activities, and communities.

A ClassAct Portal is a Web presence for each teacher's group of students. It focuses on one topic, which can fall under a traditional curriculum area – such as geography or mathematics – or explore a wide range of other areas, such as hobbies, world events, and popular culture. Environmental causes are a popular topic. The only requirement is that the teacher is passionately interested in the subject; such enthusiasm is contagious and a great model for students. Savvy teachers will also select topics that engage their students. Choosing a topic of all-consuming interest to many students – hip-hop music, Harry Potter, cartooning – is a great way to illustrate that all subjects are related and that sophisticated learning can evolve from deep immersion in any topic. The best thing about a ClassAct Portal is that it's flexible and will change with the interests of the class and the nature of the topic.

A classic example of a great ClassAct Portal is *Child Slave Labor News* (www.geocities.com/cslnews), created by students in Joann Fantina's U.S. History course at Immaculata High School in Somerville, New Jersey. As 1999 graduate Brett Peterson wrote on the site,

The students and faculty of Immaculata High School are very concerned about the problem of child slave labor. Each year, the senior U.S. History II Honors class, taught by Miss Joann Fantina, publishes numerous newsletters throughout the year covering many aspects of child slave labor. A new group of students takes over the project each year as the previous class graduates. It is a common interest among the students and is continued enthusiastically year after year.

In addition to a hefty archive of student-written articles – including “Slavery and the Link to Chocolate,” “250 Million Slaves and Counting,” “How Fair Is NAFTA?,” and “Wal-Mart in China” – the site provides links to organizations opposing slave labor and invites visitors to provide guest commentary. To support their research and develop their expertise, the students maintain contact with dozens of groups and individuals fighting child labor.

The *Child Slave Labor News* site has been online since 1998. As of this writing, it was the first hit in a Google search for “child slave labor.” How's that for real, rich, and relevant learning that enables students to participate in meaningful action toward a higher good?

How to Build a ClassAct Portal

After you have chosen a topic based on your own passionate interests or on interests you share with your students, it's time to decide where your ClassAct Portal will live. A quick route is to begin with one of the free online blogs, such as Blogger or WordPress. Although

such sites provide an easy way to get started, if you want to grow the site later by adding a wiki or a photo gallery, you may have to start all over again. I advocate setting up your own Web space instead; then you'll have more flexibility to make your ClassAct Portal an extension of your lesson plans, bulletin boards, and classroom persona.

Thanks to the sophistication of open source software and competition among Web hosts, anyone can set up a powerful Web site for \$60 per year – one that includes all the great tools that are now so easy to use. Just pick a buzzword: blog, wiki, forum, podcast, RSS (Really Simple Syndication), photo gallery, course management system, e-mail list, FAQ list – the possibilities are endless and are only getting better and easier. Simply search for a Web host that provides “cPanel” and “Fantastico” and follow a step-by-step tutorial to grow your Web presence (March, 2005).

To create content for your ClassAct Portal, you might start by gathering a hotlist of links on your chosen topic. See what the World (Wide Web) has to say about the subject. As students' first contribution to the world of ideas on the Web, they can critique and annotate the links on the list. To build an online community, immerse students in the sites on your hotlist and have them send e-mails of appreciation to the people behind the most interesting sites.

To help students track the latest news and postings on the topic, subscribe to newsfeeds and podcasts through RSS. A search for these terms plus “tutorial” will provide step-by-step instructions to get you started. Use your Web site as the ultimate refrigerator on which to post exemplary student work on the topic. These days, such work can include audio podcasts and movies just as easily as written text and scanned drawings. You can also launch a blog on the site that features new and interesting thinking. Before long, you'll have a blogroll of like-minded people who are part of the online community interested in the topic. And guess what? Lots of them won't be students. Authentic learning reaches into the real world.

Giving students an online presence can cause concern about student safety. A number of steps can help you ensure that your ClassAct Portal is safe for students. First, follow your school or school district's acceptable use policy regarding student names and images. In addition, use open source software that allows you, as the site administrator, to set permission levels for who can post articles and to monitor postings and comments. Monitoring all postings encourages students to post only their best efforts and also keeps inappropriate content off the site.

These ideas suggest the big picture. To inspire participation, I recently developed ClassActPortal.com, a resource and directory to foster and celebrate such sites. Although still new, this site's Idea Pools already feature more than 100 suggestions for ClassAct Portal topics, such as “Wild Weather,” “How Big Is That?” (understanding huge numbers), “Bumperstickers & Sound Bites,” “Box Office Blockbusters,” “Child Soldiers,” and “Global Warming & Its Impact.” In addition, the site provides a range of resources, such as user-friendly tutorials on setting up your own blog or wiki. More important, it enables visitors to read articles and view examples of sites that successfully integrate the Web into daily classroom learning.

Real, Rich, Relevant – and Essential

The ClassAct Portal is one practical way in which we can use the New WWW to create learning experiences that are real, rich, and relevant. Educators have a responsibility to develop such strategies if we want to provide our students with meaningful education in the age of whatever, whenever, wherever. Self-awareness and the construction of a meaningful life aren't just good ideas. In a culture permeated by the New WWW, these traits will be essential to counterbalance the lure of self-absorption that leads to despair.

When we watch young children, we witness joy in the present and an innate love of learning. Keeping this joy alive – nurturing it in all students as an alternative to the temptation of easy distraction – is part of our new task as educators and parents.

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