



[Print Page](#)   [Close Window](#)

## TEACHING IN A 2.0 WORLD

### School 2.0

#### *Finding Relevance in an "Always-On" World*

Tim Fish  
Winter 2009

**O**n July 29, 2008, in the Khsach Kandal district of Cambodia, Khin Mok, a self-employed silk weaver, paid off a \$500 loan that was made possible by *Kiva.org*, a website that allows donors to connect directly with the people who need them. The site was created in San Francisco in 2004 by a small group of committed individuals who combined compassion, economics, and ingenuity with the transformative power of the Internet. It links a face, a family, and a story from the developing world to the people who have the capacity to make a difference. *Kiva.org* is the *eBay* of aid.



KIVA.ORG

*Kiva.org* is also one small example of how Web 2.0 has changed the world forever. According to *Wikipedia*, Web 2.0 is "a term describing changing trends in the use of World Wide Web technology and web design that aims to enhance creativity, information sharing, and, most notably, collaboration among users." Unlike Web 1.0, where information moved in one direction, Web 2.0 is a two-way street where anyone can be an author and contributor. Web 2.0 has forced the world to take a hard look at what we believe about longstanding ideas regarding journalism, scholarship, free speech, and, soon, education. Web 2.0 brought us the citizen journalist armed with a laptop, cell phone, and digital camera. It brought us *YouTube*, *Facebook*, and *Twitter*, websites that allow anyone to put his or her life online. It brought us *Wikipedia* and fierce discussions of source validity and community authorship.

Web 2.0 ensures that *everyone* with access to Internet technology has a voice. So, what are people doing with that voice? *Kiva* members are changing the world of philanthropy; bloggers are changing the face of journalism; *Wikipedia* editors are attempting to put all human knowledge online for free; and millions of teenagers are spending nearly every free moment chatting about the smallest details of their lives.

The instructional technology build-up that began in independent schools in the mid-1990s happened before Web 2.0 was even conceived. It was inspired by the promise of improvements to the academic program. Teachers and administrators talked about ways that technology could help students become better writers, encourage creativity, facilitate research, and revolutionize communication. And, in many ways, technology has lived up to its programmatic promises, since students are motivated to work with computers to write, research, and connect with each other and with people around the world.

But something happened while we were integrating computers and networks into our classrooms. Technology climbed out of the tidy academic program box that we put it in and began to impact the heart of the independent school experience. The evolution of the Internet from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 — the same evolution that made remarkable new sites like *Kiva.org* possible — has begun to alter, for good and bad, the deep and personal relationships that have always been at the center of our communities. For instance, a teacher in New England described how the self-contained environment that is a hallmark of the boarding school experience has forever been changed by the pervasiveness of technology. Many students, he said, talk to their parents three and four times a day and remain in constant contact with their off-campus friends via *Facebook* and text messaging. This teacher felt that, while his students may be physically present, many of them are virtually still at home.

The current social network that surrounds our schools never sleeps. In contrast, when I was doing my homework in seventh grade, I wasn't preoccupied by incoming instant messages and *MySpace* updates. I was essentially alone. My thoughts were my own. Today, most students and a growing number of teachers and administrators are rarely disconnected from their electronic universe. I am uncomfortable when I see students who find it difficult to change classes without an iPod, when I hear teachers talking on a cell phone as they walk their students across campus, or when parents tell me about how their children and often their spouse can't eat dinner without responding to a text

message or replying to the buzz of a BlackBerry.

A few months ago, I asked my 11-year-old son, Ben, what car he would buy if money were no object. He didn't reply with one of the typical dream cars from my generation — a Porsche, Ferrari, or Lamborghini. Instead, he said that he would buy the Chrysler Town and Country minivan. I asked why. "It's totally wired," he said. "It has multiple LCD screens, the ability to connect a game system, and a place to plug in an iPod!" Ben wasn't interested in the speed or horsepower in his dream car — he wanted connectivity.

I can't help but feel that mobile technology is increasing the constancy in our lives and filling the fleeting moments of quiet solitude with a new definition of the word "immediate." When I was a child in the 1970s, "immediate" meant the time it took to send a first-class letter. Then FedEx came along and moved the marker to a day. Soon after, the fax moved it to several hours. And now e-mail and BlackBerries have put us in a world where we start to wonder when we don't receive a reply immediately.

**A**fter reading the last few paragraphs, it would be easy to conclude that I am anti-technology. Quite the contrary. I believe that technology plays an essential role in schools and Web 2.0 offers immense opportunities for learning, communication, and community. In fact, I spent 13 years helping teachers and schools maximize the full benefits of technology in their communities. However, I also believe that great schools inspire students to learn and grow in the context of a strong human community where teachers listen to and seek to understand each student. It is this tension between awesome opportunity and a nagging threat to community that has troubled me for the past few years.

Wherever your views lie on this opportunity–threat continuum, there is no doubt that we are fundamentally different because of the technological changes that have transpired over the past 10 years, and there is evidence that suggests the changes we are going to face in education have only begun. Clayton Christensen, a Harvard business professor and author of *Disrupting Class, How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*, predicts that 50 percent of high school courses will be online by 2019. Christensen contends that increased bandwidth and technological improvements will dramatically enhance the online classroom experience and will allow students and families to customize a personal learning environment that is tailored to their specific needs and interests. He also believes that the looming teacher shortage combined with a significant reduction in costs to implement online courses will result in this dramatic shift. For Christensen, school is more about individualized content delivery and assessment than about character and community.

Christensen's prediction is already coming true. Organizations like Stanford University, APEX Learning, Virtual High School, and K12 Inc. are providing online learning and some are even awarding diplomas to students. I would not be surprised if we have online courses with integrated video, interactive animations, personalized assessments, and customized content paths available to our students in far less than 10 years.

How can we ensure that the independent school experience will remain valuable and relevant in the "always-on" world? I believe that we need to work in our own communities to develop a unique vision for what I like to call School 2.0, a vision that is based in balance — a vision that fully leverages the power of technology and, at the same time, strengthens our sense of community, our connection to people and place. People and place define us and make us unique. They are the magic that transcends the programmatic machinery of academia, arts, and athletics. They are the organic messiness of values, relationships, mission, history, and commitment. Defining School 2.0 is essentially a strategic planning exercise that requires thoughtful dialogue about mission, technology, learning, community, and the sort of world we envision for the future.

To paraphrase Marc Prensky, we (everyone over the age of about 35) are the digital immigrants; we grew up in a world before computers and the Internet. When we see a bunch of teenagers huddled around a cell phone screen, we often see a threat. Our students are digital natives; they have never known a world without computers and the Internet; for the vast majority of them, the more technology the better. When digital natives meet *FaceBook* and cell phones, they see opportunity. To this generation of young people, Web 2.0 is the water in which they swim. It should be leveraged and embraced, not banned and discouraged.

The following anecdotes provide a glimpse into the positive, life-altering opportunities that can be created when the technical capability of Web 2.0 is merged with strong human community, collaboration, and a commitment to quality.

#### **Example 1. Using technology to build craftsmanship and consequence into the curriculum**

When I think of academic craftsmanship and consequence, I think of the oral history project at The Urban School of San Francisco (California) where students interview Holocaust survivors, Japanese internment camp victims, and other citizens whose stories would otherwise die with them. Acting as historians, the Urban School students record, transcribe, and upload their interviews to the [tellingstories.org](http://tellingstories.org) website, a primary source collection of personal narratives, which are available to the entire world. Howard Levin, the technology director at the Urban School,

invented the oral history project and implemented it with the support from Deborah Dent-Samake, a history teacher at the school. These teachers wanted their students to create something that was lasting and larger than them, to use their talents to archive and share the voices of others, and to do work with consequence, work that will live on far beyond the last day of class.

Technology is most successful when it allows teachers and students to reach beyond technology, beyond mere content, and to fully engage in original work of value. The benefits of technology will always be marginal if we perceive teaching as the mere communication and assessment of fixed ideas. On the other hand, when the pursuit of craftsmanship and consequence is at the center of the curriculum, technology is merely a partner in a larger objective. In other words, technology transforms and liberates learning communities only when it serves a more fundamental educational mission: authentic learning.

### **Example 2. Using technology to keep relationships at the center of what we do**

There is something about seeing each other that is at the heart of strong relationships. In May of 2008, Melissa Trask, a senior at Collegiate School (Virginia), was disappointed as she prepared for her graduation. At each of the major ceremonies and celebrations in her life, she had been able to look into the audience for a supportive smile from her grandparents. All indications were that this event would be different; serious health problems made it impossible for her grandparents to make the trip from Nova Scotia to Virginia.

Melissa's mother Cindy Trask, a biology teacher at Collegiate, discussed the issue with Jamie Britto, the school's technology director. Working together, they decided to use Skype software to facilitate free video conferences before and after graduation as well as a live stream of the actual ceremony. When I talked with Cindy about the impact that this use of the Internet had on her family, she said: "This was the most wonderful moment for my daughter and my parents because they got to watch her receive her diploma; then she was able to sit down in front of them with her flowers and her diploma in hand to have a conversation. My parents really felt that they shared in the experience even though they were over a thousand miles away from her. My mother even dressed up for the occasion."

There is another relationship that was at work in this anecdote that needs to be acknowledged: the relationship between Cindy Trask and Jamie Britto. Later in my conversation with Cindy, she described Jamie Britto as someone who is accessible and patient, someone who wants to do everything that he can to foster these types of relationships and to make these connections possible. Cindy went on to say, "if Jamie had not been the type of person that he is, this wouldn't have happened."

The "servant leader" relationship that the technology director has with the community is at the heart of most successful technology programs. I believe that the technology director should take a leadership role in helping the school create and implement a vision for School 2.0. Technology leadership has to be about much more than infrastructure management. To be successful, I believe a technology director should support and inspire the people and the place.

### **Example 3. When students take matters into their own hands**

Margaret Meade said it best: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world."

Nick Anderson and Ana Slavin were two seniors at Northfield Mount Hermon School (Massachusetts) who decided to make a difference in the Darfur region of Sudan. Early in 2007, they began networking with their friends to raise money for the relief effort in this war-torn area of the world. Their initial goal was ambitious to say the least: \$200,000 from 1,000 different high schools. A target of this size would seem impossible for digital immigrants; however, Nick and Ana were digital natives who saw the massive social networks on *FaceBook* and *MySpace* as a potential goldmine for their charitable cause.

Word of their efforts quickly spread on the social networking sites and Nick and Ana were able to end their first year with gift totals in excess of \$300,000. When Ana and Nick were interviewed by ABCNews in June 2007, Ana said, "I think our generation has a general willingness to be activists and to go out and do good things, but we, as teenagers, have always been kind of overlooked, and to be given this kind of empowerment, the students and teenagers have really just taken off with it."

What started with two motivated and committed student leaders has grown into the "Dollars for Darfur National School Challenge," a nationwide contest that challenges schools to raise money to end this humanitarian crisis. As you might imagine, the challenge is run by an advisory board of students, and is completely online. In their first two years, the challenge raised over \$450,000 and engaged students from thousands of schools.

In each of these examples, technology worked as an ally; it allowed teachers and students to advance a mission that was firmly in place long before computers and the Internet exploded on the scene. Instead of seeing technology as

an adversary, attacking their communities from the outside, the teachers and students at these schools embraced the power of technology to change the world, on both a personal and global scale.

Web 2.0 provides each school with the opportunity to look in the mirror and ask what elements of the program should change and what characteristics of the place should always remain the same. Only when a school has a clear understanding of its mission will it be able to confront technology when it distracts, and fully embrace it when it supports community and inspires craftsmanship. At the end of the day, the transition from School 1.0 to 2.0 requires such balance.

*Tim Fish is the assistant headmaster for academic affairs at McDonogh School (Maryland). He can be reached at [tfish@mcdonogh.org](mailto:tfish@mcdonogh.org).*

### Resources

*An Ethic of Excellence*, Ron Berger, Heinemann (Portsmouth, NH), 2003

Telling Stories website: [www.tellingstories.org](http://www.tellingstories.org)

Dollars for Darfur Challenge: [www.savedarfur.org](http://www.savedarfur.org)

Kiva website: <http://www.kiva.org/>

---

National Association of Independent  
Schools  
1620 L Street NW Suite 1100  
Washington DC, 20036-5695

NAIS is the national voice of independent  
education. We offer standards, targeted resources,  
and networking opportunities for our 1,300 member  
schools.

Tel (202) 973-9700  
Fax (202) 973-9790  
Email [info@nais.org](mailto:info@nais.org)

© 1997-2009 ALL RIGHTS  
RESERVED