

2.0 Tools: What's in it for me?



David Ferguson has taught, trained, designed instruction, and worked on performance improvement in areas ranging from rail travel to ethics for purchasing. He's good at de-mystifying and doesn't think using a wiki means you get fewer cavities. He likes tools (web 2.0 and other kinds) more for what they do than what you call them, or how cool their website is. His blog, daveswhiteboard.com, focuses on "work at learning; learning at work."

By David Ferguson

My local hardware store is like the Internet, with more sawdust. I love the variety and the specialization. At home, though, I'm content with stuff you'd recognize—no biscuit joiner here. When it comes to tools, I'm less interested in what they are than in what I get done. Basin wrench, you say?

What's in it for me?

That's not a bad way to approach Web 2.0. I know that's a term to cause eye-rolling, but don't let your vision stray. Blogs, social networks, and mini-messages can help you work on three tasks crucial for any professional: how you learn, how you work and how you connect.

Professional development used to mean conferences, workshops and other in-person activity. Those are still solid choices, but no longer the only ones. And with time pressure, budget constraints, and ever-expanding demands at work, you need to find, retain, retrieve and apply information right now, not next month.

Social bookmarks: tag, you're learning

Right now, consultant Tom Gram is helping a Toronto college develop resources for a program in entrepreneurship and

innovation. One essential tool for him is delicious.com, a site for sharing bookmarks.

Delicious puts your bookmarks online, so you can use them from any computer, not just your own. You can add your own tags (custom labels) to each bookmark. As Gram and his clients know, that makes it easier to search, find and interrelate the links you've saved.

See for yourself: I created a tag for all the tools and links in this article. No need to copy an unwieldy URL from this article; find them all (plus any I add after this goes to print) at: <http://delicious.com/WhiteboardDave/cstd09>

The curriculum in Gram's project is problem-based, "so intuitive access to resources is an important part of the program," he says. Students and instructors tag by course topic, instantly sharing articles, web sites and blogs. Each person can add her own tags or use those suggested by others.

Blogs: backing up your brain

And then there's blogging. With millions of blogs out there, you may have a certain fatigue or skepticism. I used to think of a blog as someone's Big Thought of the Day. Since I can go a week without a Big

Thought, I didn't see the point.

Then I discovered people like Harold Jarche, a consultant based in New Brunswick. He uses his blog to store and retrieve information as well as to market his services. That retrieval really made sense to me—not only for myself, but as quick help for someone else. "You missed that presentation? Go to my blog and search for 'Hans Rosling.'"

With blog software like WordPress or Blogger, you don't have to be a technician. The software automatically archives, searches, lets you tag your posts, makes it easy to link elsewhere, and invites others to comment. Both services let you blog free on their sites, so the risk is low. Or, if you've already got a website, you can usually host a blog there.

What's in a blog for you when it comes to learning and working? Jarche uses his to think out loud. "Blogging forces me to think and reflect in order to write, so that what was just an idea in my mind becomes more concrete." In addition, he'll discuss a problem on his blog or another site, and often gets an informed answer within 24 hours.

Many learning professionals agree with Jarche. There's Karl Kapp, a consultant

whose background includes adult learning, technology and e-learning. He sent me a fistful of benefits he derives from his Kapp Notes blog. It's his own personal knowledge management tool—when he reads an interesting article, he writes about it. The blog becomes a kind of 'memory box' from which he can build presentations and articles.

Speaking of memory, there's RSS (Really Simple Syndication). You've seen the orange RSS icon that means "you can subscribe to this." Feedreaders like Google Reader or NetVibes act like a single web page that delivers all your subscriptions (your feeds).



Kapp uses RSS to subscribe to the blogs of colleagues and alumni. In turn, his subscribers deliver reactions to his ideas and feedback from their own experience, or their networks, thus extending his.

Networks at work, working your network

Jeff Cobb of Mission to Learn helps organizations integrate social media and online learning into their business strategies. He regularly turns to LinkedIn to form new connections or collect information about an industry. He recommends this approach: "I'm not trying to sell you anything, just really looking for people who know how things work in this space."

"I have increasingly found Twitter to be a great tool for collecting and sharing resources. More than social bookmarking (which I also use and find highly valuable), I like using it as a way to gather and share good resources that I am not inclined to do a full blog entry about. Log new things and generate some good (albeit brief!) conversations in the process."

That's how this article came to be: I asked people like Tom, Harold, and Jeff to tell me one tool that delivers something for them. In two days I had the stories you're reading.

The first came from Montreal, where Richard Nantel is the CEO of Brandon Hall Research. Online social media have played a big role in his professional life since long before "social media" were buzzwords. A

friendship formed in a CompuServ discussion forum turned into a mutually beneficial working relationship. "I advise my friend on issues of web marketing; he provides me with advice about management."

CompuServ is long gone, but the same connections happen every minute through networks like LinkedIn and Facebook—which is where I met Richard.

Like "Web 2.0," the term "friending" on social sites can put people off. Maybe that's why LinkedIn, striving for a "professional" appearance, has "contacts."

Just remember the principle: it's not what you call the tool, it's what you get done. Make a contact, add a friend, follow someone on Twitter: these all mean you're in touch. The rest is up to you.

The tweet life (tools with cutesy lingo)

Some people have a visceral dislike of Twitter; a few of those have even tried it. To them, a micro-message of 140 characters or less makes no sense.

I was a slow starter—it took me 10 months to send one tweet a day. (Search my blog for "Newberg" and you'll see a chart, plus a link to a thoughtful post by Andrew Newberg.)

If you haven't tried it, consider this advice from marketing expert Aaron Strout regarding Twitter's potential value for networking.

"Even more important is understanding the value of 'give before you get.' This is probably the hardest one for anyone to abide by. That's mainly because when Twitter asks, "What are you doing?," it feels like you should talk about yourself. WRONG. Talk about other smart people you're meeting. Point to good articles or blog posts. Comment on how funny someone's last tweet was. At the end of the day, if you do those things, the benefits will come back to you in spades."

All these tools offer promise whether you work for yourself or within an organization. Cammy Bean, who works for InVision Learning in Westborough, Massachusetts, uses them to build a personalized professional community. "I am the only person [at my company] who does what I do. Blogging has connected me to a world of other people who do what I do... I exchange ideas with experts, I explore my own thinking, I receive critique from my

peers... I am better at what I do as a result of blogs. Much better."

When she can't participate in face-to-face events like conferences, "blogging, etc., means I can keep up with professional development."

And with professionals. Dean Shareski is with the Prairie South School Division in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. When I asked what works for him, he replied, "The metaphor I like best is to explain that it's not about tools but about people. I subscribe to people, not websites. These people comprise my research team. Whether they know it or not, they are constantly working for me: finding sources, ideas, media to support my work."

Shareski has over 1100 bookmarks at <http://delicious.com/shareski>. You can see all of them, as you can with anyone's public tags (delicious has a "do not share" option).

What's a good next step? Harold Jarche, with colleagues Michelle Martin and Tony Karrer, used Ning (a site for building online communities) to create *Web 2.0 for Learning Professionals*. They expected 60 or 70 people at this do-it-yourself introduction; over 700 showed up. The site's still there, a box full of tools.

Why not see what's in it for you?

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