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Footprints in the Digital Age

Will Richardson

In the Web 2.0 world, self-directed learners must be adept at building and sustaining networks.

As the geeky father of a 9-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter, one of my worst fears as they grow older is that they won't be Googled well. Not that they won't be able to *use* Google well, mind you, but that when a certain someone (read: admissions officer, employer, potential mate) enters "Tess Richardson" into the search line of the browser, what comes up will be less than impressive. That a quick surf through the top five hits will fail to astound with examples of her creativity, collaborative skills, and change-the-world work. Or, even worse, that no links about her will come up at all. I mean, what might "Your search did not match any documents" imply?

It's a consequence of the new Web 2.0 world that these digital footprints—the online portfolios of who we are, what we do, and by association, what we know—are becoming increasingly woven into the fabric of almost every aspect of our lives. In all likelihood, you, your school, your teachers, or your students are already being Googled on a regular basis, with information surfacing from news articles, blog posts, YouTube videos, Flickr photos, and Facebook groups. Some of it may be good, some may be bad, and most is beyond your control. Your personal footprint—and to some extent your school's—is most likely being written without you, thanks to the billions of us worldwide who now have our own printing presses and can publish what we want when we want to.

On the surface, that's an unsettling thought—but it doesn't have to be. In fact, if we are willing to embrace the moment rather than recoil from it, we may find opportunities to empower students to learn deeply and continually in ways that we could scarcely have imagined just a decade ago.

Networking: The New Literacy

Whether we like it or not, social Web technologies are having a huge influence on students who are lucky enough to be connected, even the youngest ones. Many 7- and 8-year-olds are busy exploring Club Penguin or Webkinz with other 7- and 8-year-olds half a world away, middle schoolers are connecting with global warriors in World of Warcraft, and adolescents preen themselves in front of their "friends" on MySpace and Facebook. A recent National School Boards Association survey (2007) announced that upward of 80 percent of young people who are online are networking and that 70 percent of them are regularly discussing education-related topics. They're creating all sorts of content—some, as we all know, doing so very badly—and they're doing all sorts of things with online tools that, for the most part, we're not teaching them anything about. In

the process, they're becoming Googleable without us. By and large, they do all this creating, publishing, and learning on their own, outside school, because when they enter the classroom, they typically "turn off the lights" (Prensky, 2008).

This may be the first large technological shift in history that's being driven by children. Picture a bus. Your students are standing in the front; most teachers (maybe even you) are in the back, hanging on to the seat straps as the bus careens down the road under the guidance of kids who have never been taught to steer and who are figuring it out as they go.

In short, for a host of reasons, we're failing to empower kids to use one of the most important technologies for learning that we've ever had. One of the biggest challenges educators face right now is figuring out how to help students create, navigate, and grow the powerful, individualized networks of learning that bloom on the Web and helping them do this effectively, ethically, and safely. The new literacy means being able to function in and leverage the potential of easy-to-create, collaborative, transparent online groups and networks, which represent a "tectonic shift" in the way we need to think about the world and our place in it (Shirky, 2008). This shift requires us to create engaged learners, not simply knowers, and to reconsider the roles of schools and educators.

As author John Seely Brown (Brown & Adler, 2008) points out, these shifts demand that we move our concept of learning from a "supply-push" model of "building up an inventory of knowledge in the students' heads" (p. 30) to a "demand-pull" approach that requires students to own their learning processes and pursue learning, based on their needs of the moment, in social and possibly global communities of practice. Our students must be nomadic, flexible, mobile learners who depend not so much on what they can recall as on their ability to connect with people and resources and edit content on their desktops, or, even more likely, on pocket-size devices they carry around with them. Our teachers have to be colearners in this process, modeling their own use of connections and networks and understanding the practical pedagogical implications of these technologies and online social learning spaces.

Transparent and Trackable

So what literacies must we educators master before we can help students make the most of these powerful potentials? It starts, as author Clay Shirky (2008) suggests, with an understanding of how transparency fosters connections and with a willingness to share our work and, to some extent, our personal lives. Sharing is the fundamental building block for building connections and networks; it may take the form of ruminations on life in a blog, photos of the latest family picnic on Flickr, or discussion notes students post to a classroom wiki for others to read and contribute to.

Publishing content online not only begins the process of becoming "Googleable," it also makes us findable by others who share our passions or interests. A few years ago, the teacher who stood up in a professional development gathering in Atlanta, Georgia, and voiced his passion for "mountain biking—on a unicycle" would have had little ability to

find others who enjoy such pursuits and learn with them about that avocation. Today, he can easily connect to other "municyclists" who share their adventures on their blogs or in YouTube videos. In doing so, provided he knows whom and what to trust, he can learn a great deal.

Although many students are used to sharing content online, they need to learn how to share within the context of network building. They need to know that publishing has a nobler goal than just readership—and that's engagement. Take, for example, the story of Laura Stockman, a 10-year-old from the Buffalo, New York, area. Last December, in an effort to honor the memory of her grandfather who had died the year before, Laura decided to do one good deed each day in the run-up to Christmas. She decided, with her mother's approval, to share her work with the world.

Laura's blog, "Twenty-Five Days to Make a Difference" (<http://twentyfivedays.wordpress.com>), quickly caught the eye of some other philanthropic bloggers. Within a short time, Laura found herself in the midst of a community of volunteers far outside her geographic reach. The ClustrMap on her site tracks tens of thousands of readers from such places as China, Australia, Africa, and South America (see <http://www3.clustrmaps.com/counter/maps.php?user=2cf404cc>).

But here is the difference: Laura is not just publishing, and others are not just reading. Now when she wants ideas for charities to work for as her project enters its 11th month, Laura says, "I ask my readers" (Richardson, 2008). She has collected hundreds of books for local libraries and dozens of pajamas for kids in need; she has raised thousands of dollars for charities ranging from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to local homeless shelters. In fact, Laura has become a go-to expert on younger kids doing charity work. Last April, students in Florida who wanted to make a difference in their own community interviewed her live online. Her interactions with her network, on both her blog and the other blogs she reads, teach her much about a passion that is not in the standard curriculum. In the process, Laura is already on her way to being Googled well.

In addition, under her mother's guidance and care, Laura is learning online network literacies firsthand. As Stanford researcher Danah Boyd (2007) points out, we are discovering the potentials and pitfalls of this new public space. What we say today in our blogs and videos will persist long into the future and not simply end up in the paper recycling bin when we clean out our desks at the end of the year. What we say is copyable; others can take it, use it, or change it with ease, making our ability to edit content and comprehend the ethical use of the content we read even more crucial. The things we create are searchable to an extent never before imagined and will be viewed by all sorts of audiences, both intended and unintended.

What Students Need to Know

These new realities demand that we prepare students to be educated, sophisticated owners of online spaces. Although Laura is able to connect, does she understand, as researcher Stephen Downes (2005) suggests, that her network must be diverse, that she must actively seek dissenting voices who might push her thinking in ways that the "echo chamber" of kindred thinkers might not? Is she doing the work of finding new voices to include in the conversation? Is she able to make astute decisions about the people with whom she interacts, keeping herself safe from those who might mean her harm? Is she learning balance in her use of technology, or is she falling into the common pattern of spending hours at the keyboard, losing herself in the network? This 10-year-old probably still needs to learn many of these things, and she needs the guidance of teachers and adults who know them in their own practice.

More than ever before, students have the potential to own their own learning—and we have to help them seize that potential. We must help them learn how to identify their passions; build connections to others who share those passions; and communicate, collaborate, and work collectively with these networks. And we must do this not simply as a unit built around "Information and Web Literacy." Instead, we must make these new ways of collaborating and connecting a transparent part of the way we deliver curriculum from kindergarten to graduation.

Younger students need to see their teachers engaging experts in synchronous or asynchronous online conversations about content, and they need to begin to practice intelligently and appropriately sharing work with global audiences. Middle school students should be engaged in the process of cooperating and collaborating with others outside the classroom around their shared passions, just as they have seen their teachers do. And older students should be engaging in the hard work of what Shirky (2008) calls "collective action," sharing responsibility and outcomes in doing real work for real purposes for real audiences online.

But to do all that, we educators must first own these technologies and be able to take advantage of these networked learning spaces. In this way, we can fully prepare students not just to be Googled well, but to be findable in good ways by people who share their passions for learning and who may well end up being lifelong teachers, mentors, or friends.

Get Started!

Here are five ideas that will help you begin building your own personal learning network.

1. *Read blogs related to your passion.* Search out topics of interest at <http://blogsearch.google.com> and see who shares those interests.
2. *Participate.* If you find bloggers out there who are writing interesting and relevant posts, share your reflections and experiences by commenting on their posts.
3. *Use your real name.* It's a requisite step to be Googled well. Be prudent, of course, about divulging any personal information that puts you at risk, and guide students in how they can do the same.
4. *Start a Facebook page.* Educators need to understand the potential of social networking for themselves.
5. *Explore Twitter* (<http://twitter.com>), a free social networking and micro-blogging service that enables users to exchange short updates of 140 characters or fewer. It may not look like much at first glance, but with Twitter, the network can be at your fingertips.

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Building a Digital Locker: Personal Learning Networks Explained

Students drive their education with custom-made Web pages.

by [Vicki Davis](#)

While updating his page for [Digiteen](#), a digital-citizenship project, a student asked me, "Have you heard of the Stop, Block, and Tell Program that is helping kids with cyberbullying?" Just moments later, another student informed me, "I found that teaching digital netiquette is one of the major issues in digital citizenship."

Some people may be surprised that these words are from my ninth-grade students during their original research for Digiteen. Breaking news happens daily in my classroom, where I've taught my students how to be in the know. The students gain this ability when they construct their personal learning network (PLN) at the start of each project.

A PLN becomes a student's virtual locker, and its content changes based on the student's current course work. When I assign them a term paper, the students comb the Web to sign up for information that will feed into their personalized Web page to construct a PLN for that topic. When they get a new project, they assemble another page.

"My PLN has RSS feeds to tie everything onto my iGoogle page, such as new blog posts, updates on the wiki, and so on," says my student [Virginia](#). "I also have a feed from [Google News](#) so I can get live updates from the Web on recent examples of the topic I'm working on. It basically does the research for me."

Resources and messages come in from students' project partners around the world, and then a Really Simple Syndication, or RSS, feeder (also known as Really Simple Subscriptions) summarizes and puts the resources into my students' PLN Web pages. This feature helps them keep up with all the changes without a lot of hassle. When a project is over, they delete the old resources to make room for new ones.

I'm not surprised that my students become mini-experts using this method. After all, this amazing practice has transformed my life and provided me with the content to catapult my own blog, [Cool Cat Teacher](#), to new heights. It now gets more than 200,000 views a month after just three short years.

Research Agendas

Perhaps the most telling response on the subject of PLNs is from my student Hope, who says, "My iGoogle page is very helpful and helps me keep things organized. It lets me know when my agenda changes." The fact that a ninth grader would talk about her own research agenda gives



a glimpse into the power of the PLN; she is using a term here that is often reserved for grad students!

Constructing a PLN is the essential skill that moves my students into the driver's seat of their own learning. It helps them sort through and manage the proliferation of online materials that jam the information superhighway. It is also indispensable to our project-learning curriculum, which includes challenging projects such as the [Flat Classroom Project](#), the [Horizon Project](#), and Digiteen.

[Tony Wagner](#), from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, lists assessing and analyzing information as one of the [seven survival skills](#) in the new world of work. I think the ability to create a PLN is a fundamental information-management skill that will help my students succeed in the future.

How Does a PLN Work?

RSS technology enables the students to create a PLN. The RSS button, often called a chicklet because of its resemblance to a piece of Chiclets chewing gum, contains all the programming required to add customized sources of news and information to a PLN with just a click. These buttons are on just about every blog, wiki, and mainstream media Web site. Clicking the button provides a free subscription to that site's latest information.

An RSS reader is a Web site that puts together all this information in an easy-to-read format. [Google Reader](#), [netvibes](#), [Pageflakes](#), [Bloglines](#), and my preferred reader, [iGoogle](#), are all examples of sites providing RSS readers. The RSS reader is the raw material for building a PLN. I teach the kids in my Computer Fundamentals course how to set up their [RSS reader](#) during the first week of class.

Like an empty locker, the RSS reader starts off as a blank Web page, and students must learn how to seek out sources of information to fill the page that will make up their research. The PLN is never complete, but it evolves to meet the changing needs of each individual project.

My friend Cheryl Oakes, a collaborative-content coach in Wells, Maine, uses [Portaportal](#) to create a PLN as the start page for secondary school projects. Some teachers and media specialists now make it their job to construct these project portals for students so they can direct where the kids go for information. It is very easy to build these spaces for students. However, I think it is vital that they eventually know how to customize their own spaces for learning.

PLNs Aren't Perfect

Some educators may be concerned that Facebook notifications and other notices from sites blocked by the school's firewall can get onto an iGoogle page. However, these notifications still do not give students access to the sites themselves. Also, some RSS readers allow users to add games and even full television programs. To handle this issue with my students, I make sure that every computer screen is viewable from my desk.

Students also share a copy of their PLNs with me as the first step of every project, and I periodically check the content of these pages for appropriateness. The PLNs are set to be their start pages when they log on to the Internet.

With PLNs, we can now empower the personalized learning we've been longing to bring to education.

I'm thrilled that my students know how to connect efficiently to great sources of information and can now construct an environment that will make them lifelong learners. And, truly, creating a self-directed learner is the pinnacle of educational achievement.

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