Integrating Web 2.0 and social media into classroom teaching: The benefits, obstacles, and possible solutions

By Jing Zhao

As a teacher, have you ever wished not to have to create different quizzes for make-up tests or not to have to grade them? Have you ever wished you could edit more than one student's essay at the same time while they are writing them and give them instant feedback without walking crazy from one table to another? Or could you let each of your students work at their own pace and challenge their own level and give them customized instruction? Have you ever dreamed of letting your students collaborate on a group project after school on their own schedule at their own home and still be able to present as a group the very next day in the class? Or what if you could send out an announcement to students after school and hope all the students still get the message before next school day? Have you ever hoped you can have access all of your school files anywhere anytime in any computer and share those with all or some of your students?

As a K-12 teacher, we are so familiar with the above negative scenarios. These seemingly difficult tasks can be done using the latest Web 2.0 tools and social media. What is Web 2.0? According to Tim O'Reilly, the founder and CEO of O'Reilly Media Inc., Web 2.0 tools have the following features:

1. Use web as a platform – Instead of installing a software on certain computers, the user can get into the website, such as Google or Twitter,

to use the service in any computer, anywhere.

2. Control your own data – such as on Facebook, each user has her own pictures, profile, massages, and friends list. Users can add or delete their own content at anytime.
3. Provide service, not just packaged software – service is above the level of a single device: user can use the service on any computer with internet, on any smart phone, or on any tablet.
4. Have control over unique, hard-to-create data sources that get richer as more people use them – eBay's competitive advantage comes from the collective activity of their buyers and sellers, which makes any new entrant offering similar services significantly less attractive.
5. Trust users as co-developers – Wikipedia will not be this popular without millions of users adding, editing, and revising the contents for years.
6. Harness collective intelligence – Google uses PageRank, a method of using the link structure of the web rather than just the characteristics of documents to provide better search results. (2005).

Social media, under Web 2.0 terms, are websites that allow users to conduct two way interactions: not just to give or receive information, but also to interact with the media or users while giving or receiving the information. Social media is also considering a type of websites fall under the umbrella of Web 2.0.

As a world language teacher, I use a multi-media flashcards website Quizlet to free myself from repeated pronunciation of words, from the making of vocabulary

PowerPoint or flashcards, and from creating and grading vocabulary quizzes. Students can play different difficulty levels of vocabulary games to compete with their peers; generate their own vocabulary quizes based on their own level; they can create, reuse, edit and share flashcards with their classmates. I also use a secure social networking website Edmodo to encourage students to communicate in target language in a meaningful way. While they are posting their threads, I give students instant feedback on their writing in a "nonlinear" way (Casey & Evans, 2002). They can interact with each other and with me at the same time. I can share great resources such as videos, links and document to different groups, and invite parents to see what is going on in our online classroom. I can post assignments and ask students to turn in their assignment online and grade them. I can also join the online professional community of world language teachers and participate in an online professional development webinar.

Today, almost every high schooler who owns a smart phone will check their Facebook and Tweeter first thing in the morning. Teachers can send out announcements or interesting resources to students through Twitter. Wikispace allows teachers to create space for students to collabrate on the same project in different locations or during different time frames. This will allow more participation and it is also an extension of classroom teaching. Box, an online cloud storage service, allows teachers to open school files anywhere, anytime, in any computer and share files with students.

The advantages of incorporating Web 2.0 tools and social media into

classroom teaching include but are not limited to: incorporating popular culture practice into classroom teaching; connecting schooling with student life experience; personalizing and creating on-demand learning; promoting social interaction and collaboration among students, and between teacher and students; giving students ownership of their own learning; differentiating teaching; pacing students with different background, and academic levels; taking consideration of students' different learning styles.

With all of the benefits stated above, why can we only see this type of practice in a few classrooms? I think there are resistant powers from different locations: from teachers, from districts, and from parents. Based on my experience, students usually welcome this type of teaching and learning approach, and are less likely to become the resisting power.

Some teachers who are used to traditional teaching sometimes will see social media or technology as a negative interruption of schooling. Without the experience of using the latest technology and seeing the benefits, many teachers may simply assume too much technology will only distract students' attention from "real" more traditional learning. They may also be concerned about how the implementation of technology will lose the humanity side of face-to-face interaction. Time is also a big constraint on teachers. Our busy schedule does not leave much room for enough professional development on the latest technology. As Casey and Evans (2011) pointed out, using social media in classrooms requires more preparation time for teachers. It could also create challenges for classroom management. With more and

more districts facing budget cuts, less and less technology professional development are provided. With the latest trends of common core, standardized testing and teacher evaluation, technology training is not on the priority list of in-service workshops.

School districts may be concerned about parents and public complaints and therefore restrict the uses of social media in classroom. I know many school districts block social media sites such as Facebook, Youtube, and Blogs from classrooms. Parents sometimes will be against using social media in classroom or school work, since many times there are negative reports of students becoming addicted to social media and then failing in their school work or getying bullied through social media sites. If parents themselves are not familiar with these tools and do not see the benefits of using them, it is very likely they will develop a negative feeling for using them in classrooms. Depending on students' social economic status, computers or wireless access may not be available at home; this lack could leave some students in great disadvantage if using social media or other technology is mandated for school work. More research needs to be done on how parents think about social media's affects on children's learning and on how access (and a lack thereof) plays an important role.

Although there are many obstacles to applying Web 2.0 and social media in the classroom, there are ways teachers can overcome these obstacles in their own building or district.

First, teachers need to understand that using technology should not replace face-to-face teaching; instead it is a supplement of face-to-face teaching (Sengupta, 2011). There are times when the teacher has to give group instruction or individual

help based on students' needs. There are also times students can chose their own learning pace, customizing their own learning content using Web 2.0 tools. At these times, the teacher's role shifts into facilitator, monitor, and helper. Using Web 2.0 tools does not mean the teacher doesn't have to work; it means the teacher may be freed from busy, repetitive simple work, such as grading multiple choices quizzes, or making up different versions of quizzes to prevent cheating, for example. Therefore, teachers can use their time more effectively and give more customized teaching to different individuals.

Second, teachers need more time to explore more tools to improve the teaching and learning experiences in classrooms. Participating in technology professional development is a great way. If budgets do not allow, teachers can use free resources around them, our students. We can "be the students of our students." Teachers also need to collaborate with IT staff in the school district, talk to them regularly to explain the issues and challenges faced in the classroom, and see if they have suggestions or solutions that they can offer. Many times you will find you are not the first one who has encountered the problem. Sometimes there is already a solution for that problem, you are just not aware of it. Teachers also need take an active role in district decision-making about technology. For example, if there is a technology committee in your school district, you can volunteer to serve as a committee member. This way, you will have access to the updated information of district technology purchases and implementation plans. Also, you can have a say on adopting district technology policy.

School districts need to act faster on examining the benefits of allowing social media or other Web 2.0 tools to pass the school firewall. Although there are unpredictable risks for any new technology immplementation, it is also a big loss if schools do not incorporate the latest technology that the workplace already uses or is moving torward. In order to use Web 2.0 tools effectively in classrooms, districts need to offer more technology professional development opportunities. Some of them can be done online or through Web 2.0 tools with a lower cost.

For researchers, more research needs to be done about the impact of integrating social media and Web 2.0 into classroom teaching. There is not enough research about on online teaching and learning issues such as how to manage the chaotic learning environment and "nonlinear" fashion of teaching and learning while using technology; how to apply digital learning in different disciplines; and how to close the achievement gap by utilizing use Web 2.0 tools in teaching. These are all important areas that need some further research.

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