

# Collaboration in a **Web 2.0** Environment



CONNECTED CLASSROOM

**S**yndication is one of the hallmarks of a Web 2.0 environment, transforming the way we think about information. In a Web 1.0 environment, users go to the information, visiting each Web site that contains information of interest. In a Web 2.0 environment, information comes to the user.

## Syndication

**XML**  
**RDF**  
**RSS 2.0**

Web syndication refers to a method through which a portion of a Web site is made available to other sites. You have probably noticed the orange icons that are increasingly found on Web pages.

These indicate availability of an RSS feed (also referred to as a Web feed). RSS, as you may have heard, stands for “Really Simple Syndication.” This capability is changing the business, social, and entertainment worlds. It also offers new opportunities for collaboration in the connected classroom.

What are some of the educational possibilities? Syndicated feeds can be used to follow multiple student postings, facilitate collaborative writing, share images associated with group projects, and track news topics related to a subject area.

## Following Multiple Student Postings

Consider, for example, a teacher who asks 30 students in a class to develop projects in which results are reported in individual blogs. As soon as the work is posted, it can be available to the teacher (and optionally to the other members

of the class). The Pew Foundation notes that three in five teenagers have created online content such as blogs and that teenagers increasingly use blogs to stay in touch with one another and to tune in to friendship networks. Integrating blogs into class projects allows these students to use the same skills that they are employing outside of school.

Teachers who incorporate blogs into class assignments find that the logistics of following multiple blogs requires some planning. The right tools simplify the task. The most recent version of Firefox (Version 1.5 or later) is RSS-aware. Sites with RSS feeds can be added as live bookmarks that are automatically updated as new content appears. The Thunderbird mail reader also incorporates an RSS feed reader. The next version of Outlook will also incorporate this feature. In the future, RSS capability is likely to be built into almost every application, offering a wide range of options. Web-based readers are especially useful, because they allow Web feeds to be followed from any location with an Internet connection. Bloglines is one of the older and more mature Web-based readers, but there are many others to choose from (*Editor’s note:* See Resources on the next page for this and other Web 2.0 applications).

Using a reader such as Bloglines to follow a group of class blogs is akin to asking students to drop off assignments at the teacher’s desk. The Web feed reader aggregates all the blogs into one convenient location, and updates the display as students contribute new content to their blogs.

**By Glen Bull**

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## Collaboration and Syndication

The Web-based word processor Writely is another good tool for collaborative team projects in which several students work together, and is well suited to use with blogs. Writely permits several students to jointly edit a document. It's Web-based, so students can edit the document from different locations.

When students complete a draft, they can click the Writely "blog"

button to post the document to a blog for others to review. Once

the project is published in the blog, it can be followed through an RSS reader such as Bloglines.

The combination of Writely in concert with a blog is a good example of the concept of small pieces loosely joined made possible by RSS feeds. Each individual lightweight application is relatively easy to learn, is available at no charge to end users, and can be accessed from any computer with an Internet connection.

In the same vein, collaborative Web 2.0 To Do applications such as TaDa lists allow students to jointly maintain a checklist of items for project planning. As you might expect, this application also provides an RSS feed. Web 2.0 photo sharing services such as Flickr also offer RSS feeds that are ideally suited to class projects. Each student who posts images uses an agreed upon descriptor to tag each image. Flickr provides an RSS feed for any tag of interest. This permits new images to be viewed in the news reader as they are posted by the group.

The Web 2.0 applications described have several characteristics in common. They all store both application and data on the Web, are available without charge to end users, and incorporate RSS feeds. It is not necessary to understand how to employ RSS feeds to make use of these ap-

plications. The Web-based editor can simply be used as a lightweight word processor, for example, but familiarity with Web feeds extends the capabilities of these applications and allows them to exchange information.

## The Web 2.0 Desktop

A number of Web 2.0 desktops such as the Google personal home page are emerging that provide a personalized starting point for accessing Web 2.0

services. NetVibes is one that is particularly interesting, providing access to RSS feeds,

mail through GMail, photos through Flickr, and Web-based word processing through Writely, along with bookmarks, Web notes, and all the other services that users have come to expect in a Web 2.0 environment.

The Web 2.0 desktop is simple to configure. Editing is as simple as typing directly on the page. The services in a Web 2.0 desktop are live. The newest mail appears in the mail window, the latest Flickr images appear in the photo window, and the local weather appears in the weather banner. This characteristic contrasts with Web 1.0 personal portals that were essentially pages of static links. A Web 2.0 desktop offers an excellent starting point for exploring the interactive capabilities of this environment.

## Following a Topic of Interest

Syndication makes it easy to follow topics related to your subject or content area. Newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* offer individual RSS feeds for every major topic that they cover. In the future, all online periodicals and Web sites will include RSS feeds. In Bloglines, you can even create an RSS feed that provides an ongoing updated search for a topic of interest. As new references to the topics of interest appear, the results appear in your RSS reader.

Services such as FeedDigest make it possible to display Web feeds directly on a class Web page. Each time the page is visited, the latest news on selected topics appears. FeedDigest has another interesting feature that can generate a feed for a del.icio.us (social bookmarking) account. As you bookmark favorite Web pages, the bookmarks also can appear on your class Web page, highlighting them for your students.

There are several other ways to share news feeds with students. A list of RSS feeds can be exported as an OPML (Outline Processor Markup Language) file. When this file is made available to students, they can import the file into their favorite news reader.

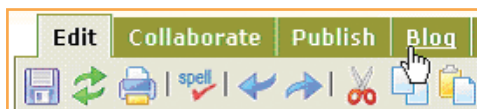
## Conclusions

Many Internet users make use of RSS feeds embedded in applications without realizing it. For example, the Podcast feature in iTunes makes use of RSS feeds. However, a Yahoo survey suggests that a relatively small percentage of users (less than 10 percent) are actively making use of this capability.

Because syndication is the glue that connects the Web 2.0 world, the educational possibilities are nearly unlimited. I have suggested a few possibilities for collaboration and sharing, but I hope you will use this as a starting point for exploration.

## Resources

Bloglines: <http://www.bloglines.com>  
 FeedDigest: <http://www.feeditdigest.com>  
 Flickr: <http://www.flickr.com>  
 GMail: <http://www.gmail.google.com>  
 NetVibes: <http://www.netvibes.com>  
 TaDa: <http://www.tadalists.com>  
 Writely: <http://www.writely.com>



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