Never Mind the Edupunks; or, The Great Web 2.0 Swindle

By Brian Lamb and Jim Groom

History is hard to know, because of all the hired lies, but even without being sure of “history” it seems entirely reasonable to think that every now and then the energy of a moment comes to a head in a long fine flash, for reasons that nobody really understands at the time—and which never explain, in retrospect, what actually happened.

That’s kind of what it felt like to be an open ed tech three years ago. Everyone seemed to agree that we had to break down the silos in higher education. People were flocking to create blog and wiki spaces. Open formats were a given. Media and content were coming together into an electrifying holistic energy. You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning.
And that was the handle—that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn’t need that. Our energy would simply prevail.

There was no point in fighting—on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave . . .

But now, just a few years later, you can pull your iPhone out of your pocket, and with the right kind of approved proprietary augmented reality app, you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back.

Has the wave of the open web crested, its promise of freedom crashed on the rocks of the proprietary web? Can open education and the corporate interests that control mainstream Web 2.0 co-exist? What does “open educational technology” look like, and does it stand for anything? Do higher education institutions dare seize a mission of public service in fostering an open web worthy of the name?

The Rise of Open Educational Technology

“Remember when the Internet was about opening up access to information and breaking down the barriers between content creators and content consumers? Think back to when spam was just a meat-like substance. To those heady days when Timothy Leary was predicting that the PC would be the LSD of the nineties. Before the DMCA. Before eBay. Back when the Web was supposed to be a boundless Borgesian ‘Library of Babel’ and not a global supermarket. Forget that the dot-com era ever happened—if you were an investor or working for stock options back then, maybe you already have.”

It’s worth reflecting just how rigid most educational web technology was in 2004, when the words above were published in EDUCAUSE Review. At that time, it was widely assumed that serious online learning had to happen inside a designated learning management system, a closed and tightly controlled environment that was effectively cut off from the rest of the web. The difficulties in migrating learning materials from one system to another, or even from one version of a system to a newer one, were so severe that urgent activity was dedicated to defining interoperability standards such as the SCORM (Sharable Content Object Reference Model) standards (http://www.adlnet.gov/Technologies/scorm/default.aspx) and the IMS Learning Object Metadata (LOM) specification (http://www.imsglobal.org/metadata/). These standards were mindbendingly complex and almost impossible to justify to the bemused educators expected to adopt them. Even systems that purported to comply with these standards struggled to facilitate sharing in any meaningful sense.

Meanwhile, an uncoordinated insurgent movement was taking shape on the open web.

That same 2004 issue of EDUCAUSE Review featured a piece by Stephen Downes describing the rapid expansion of weblog platforms in education. It did not take long for online self-publishing based on relatively simple web protocols (the URL, the RSS feed) to prove itself superior to the cumbersome learning object repository paradigm, and soon many in higher education started questioning the need for specialized learning management systems as well. Participatory approaches proliferated across media and tools: social bookmarking, podcasting, online video, social networking, microblogging, and countless similar topics began popping up in the EDUCAUSE 7 Things You Should Know About... series (http://www.educause.edu/7Things). The common defining principle here is openness, leading naturally to more comprehensive shifts in
thinking about practice, whether these are notions of “Web 2.0 storytelling,” promising a pedagogy that mirrors the participatory narratives of social media, or of a “personal cyberinfrastructure,” dramatically transforming the relationship between learner and learning environment.7

With the rise of alternative copyright licensing schemes such as the Creative Commons, it became clear, as Martin Weller asserted in 2008, that the cost of sharing had collapsed (even if institutional thinking still had a vestigial attachment to the learning object model).8 The old silos were not being interconnected so much as abandoned for a host of alternatives. The change was reminiscent of how once-dominant proprietary web portals such as AOL, CompuServe, and Prodigy had suddenly found themselves rendered irrelevant a decade earlier by the emergence of the generative web.9 When it came to online learning, the consensus seemed to be, to quote David Wiley, that “simple wins”10—that the values of open educational technology were certain to prevail.

Yet if victory was then within our grasp, it now seems to be slipping through our fingers.

Web 2.0 Giveth, and It Taketh Away

The present range of Web 2.0 service providers offers a self-evident strategic technology framework. Without much effort, online teachers and learners can quickly assemble dynamic, networked personal learning environments simply by adopting the most popular tools in any particular domain. Having signed up for a Gmail account, a user can publish websites with Blogger, manage groups and mailing lists with Google Groups, videoconference with Google Talk, write collaboratively with Google Docs, track topics with Google Alerts, manage syndicated feeds with Google Reader, share video with YouTube, post images with Picassa, and do whatever it is that Google Wave is supposed to do. We need not belabor the power and popularity of services such as Flickr, Facebook, and Twitter. All this incredible functionality is delivered in remarkably stable and user-friendly environments, and it’s available free of charge!

It seems almost unfair to expect ed techs to compete with the awe-inspiring innovation of corporate Web 2.0. Indeed, in an era of economic austerity and the apparently futile race to meet the ever-changing needs of users, it is arguably inefficient and even irresponsible to spend resources providing inferior analogues. Online educational content and activity is increasingly

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moving to corporate-owned spaces, whether through individual choice or across the enterprise via cloud computing and services such as Google Apps for Education or Apple's iTunesU.

It may not surprise readers that the two of us—a couple of embittered Gen-X’ers who’ve been associated with the “edupunk” aesthetic—look at the commodification of online educational environments with distaste. At the risk of indulging our stereotypical knee-jerk anti-corporatism, we note here several concerns. First, the most common objection to a wider adoption of many popular Web 2.0 tools surrounds the implications for privacy. Facebook's long-standing and ongoing bait-and-switch tactics with users' data have been well-documented. It's almost impossible to conceptualize the data that Google can conceivably pull together on individuals, not only from mining users' direct interactions with Google's applications but also through tracking of searches, activity captured by Google's search crawlers and Google Analytics software, and its near-omnipresent click tracking and analysis capacity.

Second, the overriding and inescapable reality of all of the services mentioned above is that their business model is predicated on advertising. As Steve Greenberg has stated: “You are not Facebook’s customer. You are the product that they sell to their real customers—advertisers. Forget this at your peril.” This simple reality underlies almost all considerations having to do with these tools, whether we’re talking about the persistence of online resources, the ownership of personal data, or whose interests will be served as these online environments continue to evolve. To use these tools is to reinforce, however indirectly, the “advertised life,” the incursion of commoditization ever deeper into human thought and interaction. The question is whether there is a role for higher education to promote “safe spaces” free of this influence.

In addition to advertising, companies such as Google and Apple have
entered into lucrative agreements with the cultural industries, and as a result, we can expect the values associated with educators and the public interest to be of secondary importance at best. Proprietary needs will prevail, even if we trust that these companies set out to “do no evil.” Take the case of YouTube’s Content ID service, which is described as “an advanced set of copyright policies and content management tools to give rights holders control of their content.”15 Essentially, this service is a mechanism for copyright holders to search for, identify, and remove copies of their owned materials from YouTube. Unfortunately, this automated system has difficulty discerning between instances of piracy and instances of commentary that exercise fair use rights. For instance, a parody promoting the fair use information service of the Critical Commons project, based at the University of Southern California, was removed from YouTube as part of a broader takedown of “Hitler Downfall meme” videos.16 A lecture by the noted copyright lawyer and activist Lawrence Lessig, containing snippets of copyrighted material (themselves intended to demonstrate examples of fair use), was also silenced when it was targeted by Content ID.17 If prominently engaged and informed users such as the Critical Commons and Lawrence Lessig can see their rights as producers be disregarded by the invisible hand of automated corporate censorship, what sort of treatment might we expect for instructors and students?

The preceding points should not be read as blanket condemnations of these services or as suggestions that these services can’t be used fruitfully in academic contexts. Both of us are longtime and often enthusiastic users of all of the proprietary services mentioned here. Rather, our question is whether IT staff in academic environments might not aspire to a vital mission: to being something more than consumers and cheerleaders for commercial products.

Open Educational Technology in Theory and Practice

There are simply too many applications of open-source software, open content, and public-service teaching and learning practice to cover them all here. Below are outlines of two of our favorite examples of open educational technology. More-detailed descriptions, as well as interviews with the practitioners, are available online (http://www.educause.edu/er/LambGroomCaseStudies).

Case Study: Murder, Madness, and Mayhem

In the spring of 2008, Professor Jon Beasley-Murray launched his students at the University of British Columbia on a project to improve the inadequate and shallow coverage of Latin American literary studies by the online encyclopedia Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3AWikiProject_Murder_Madness_and_Mayhem). Working in groups, some students were assigned to topics that did not yet have articles while others were tasked with improving existing articles. The grading scheme was explicitly tied to the criteria and external peer-review processes used by Wikipedia to assign “good article” and “featured article” status.18 Students were pushed to develop both traditional and new media literacy skills. The result was scholarly yet engaging public resources that have been read by hundreds of thousands of information-seekers. It is also worth noting that no license, usage, or subscription fees have to be paid to Wikipedia for the provision of this incredible learning environment.

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Waltzer, administrator of the CUNY platform Blogs@Baruch, “to gradually integrate into the school’s general education curriculum the deep, critical examination of how digital tools are changing the way we think and live.”

Also worth noting is that educational technologists not only draw from the wide-ranging developer communities but also collaborate with the many ed techs who have implemented these tools and added functionality. The institution that invests in these tools saves money on license fees and expensive external consultants while also investing in the development of its staff, building intellectual capacity and ensuring a sustainable and dynamic future for its online environments.

**Talk – Action = Zero**

Ed techs like to claim that the Internet represents a revolution in human communication, one with profound effects on how we produce, consume, share, and value knowledge. If that is the case, maybe the ownership, control, and structure of these environments should be more than an afterthought. We strongly believe that higher education should embrace a mission to create, cultivate, and promote “safe spaces” that are not only open but also free from overtly commercialized interests. Educators are currently at a crossroads. The choices we make now will decide what sort of online environment will be available in the future. And despite all the current anti-institutional talk surrounding today’s higher education that proffers corporate mindsets in the name of efficiency (we sense a hip neo-liberal party with the public paying the bill), institutions remain relevant to us if only because they represent an idea of a publicly-accountable alternative. We see a place for colleges and universities that are more supportive of and integrated with the wider public beyond the institutional gates, drawing on the lessons of successful open networks for inspiration.

As Michael Feldstein notes of edu-punk, the “edu” is just as important as
the “punk.” And although edupunk was first expressed in reaction against the blinkered and elitist academy (and the proprietary interests that all too often feast on institutional fear, uncertainty, and doubt), it ultimately depends on a common sense of purpose, cooperation, and action to shape a vision for the future. We dream of higher education that embraces its role as a guardian of knowledge, that energetically creates and zealously protects publicly-minded spaces promoting enlightenment and the exchange of ideas. We need green spaces for conviviality on the web.

Institutions of higher education—and the open ed techs who work in them—are in a unique position to create and preserve these spaces.

Notes
1. With apologies to the memory of Hunter S. Thompson, who wrote the original text on which this was based, in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream (New York: Rondom House, 1971).

2. Whatever you call it, we have no intention of claiming this broad range of practice as “edupunk.”


4. We feel that it is impossible to cite all of the people who have made a contribution to this movement. We regret every omission.


11. Indeed, the legality of using these tools in educational contexts has been questioned in Canada as a potential violation of students’ privacy rights. See Tony Bates, “Can Web 2.0 Tools Be Legally Used for Education in Canada?” E-Learning and Distance Education Resources, March 05, 2010, <http://www.tonybates.ca/2010/03/05/can-web-2-0-tools-be-legally-used-for-education-in-canada/>.


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