



**MONICA MARTINEZ**

## How a New Generation of Teachers Will Change Schools

In September, I wrote about the unprecedented opportunities for mass collaboration and action and how students can be enabled to be a “smart mob,” “a group that, contrary to the usual connotations of a mob, behaves intelligently or efficiently because of its exponentially increasing network links” (Rheingold 2002). It’s almost common knowledge that youth use social media to share information, collaborate on projects of shared interest, organize, and socialize. But we often overlook how teachers are using these media to link up through loose networks of peers to develop their own teaching skills and to extend their reach beyond the classroom.

Many see social media as a passing fad or something one does for “fun.” Social media are a communications channel that opens a world of possibilities and, in many ways, will become the new operating DNA of incoming teachers and some of our current teachers. The web catalyzed the ability of adults over age 45 to search and retrieve information and become informed consumers, citizens, employees, educators, parents, or learners. This was, and most often for me is, sufficient. But for those under age 26, the web is no longer about idly surfing and passively reading, listening, or watching. They want to use the web to share and socialize within loosely connected communities. Adults between ages 27 and 45 primarily use e-mail but are migrating toward using some social networking tools for communication (MediaBadger 2009). And according to Rapleaf, an Internet software company, women are at the forefront of using social media (Hoffman 2008).

Therefore, it should be no surprise that teachers are yearning for some form of connection by using social media. Teachers are self-organizing to share curricula through open educational resources (OER), educational materials and resources offered freely and openly for anyone to use and, under some

licenses, to re-mix, improve, and redistribute. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has been sponsoring high-quality open academic content, breaking down barriers to open educational content, and encouraging people worldwide to use OER because “the world’s knowledge is a public good and . . . technology in general and the World Wide Web, in particular, provide an extraordinary opportunity for everyone to share, use, and reuse knowledge” (Atkins, Brown, and Hammond 2007).

Open educational resources include such content as course materials or content modules. While this field is growing, some web sites with open content include Connexions, The National Repository of Online Courses, Curriki, WikiEducator, MIT Open Courseware, and OER Commons. Connexions ([www.cnx.org](http://www.cnx.org)), for example, is a web site where anyone can “view and share educational material made of small knowledge chunks called modules that can be organized as courses, books, reports, etc. Anyone may view or contribute.” Connexions provides a collaborative environment for developing, sharing, and publishing scholarly content on the web. At OER Commons, a teacher or learner can search open content by level or grade, subject area or issue, such as classroom management. Some of these sites make available curricula and other learning resources whose quality has been vetted by members or partners, while others encourage or rely on member contributions and depend on the community to manage quality.

OER can also include software or tools that facilitate using this open learning content. For example, some teachers are reaching out by using videos. TeacherTube ([www.teachertube.com](http://www.teachertube.com)) allows anyone to upload and share a personally created video about any topic or lesson without any external assessment. TeacherTube’s goal is to provide an online community where teachers can share instructional videos. Online groups at TeacherTube include “Math Geeks and Proud of It,” specific high school groups, or districts. This is an example of es-

*A new generation of teachers who are more comfortable with social networking present an opportunity to change how they teach and collaborate and how students learn — if we let them.*

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establishing a new digital medium through which to create learning experiences. The number of educational video sharing sites is increasing. This medium can complement, and sometimes rival, traditional textbooks and blackboards.

Some teachers use Moodle, an open source courseware package for educators to create online learning communities and courses for students. For example, San Diego Unified School District has used Moodle for more than three years to help educators create effective online, constructivist, learning communities. Through

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this framework, students and teachers share ideas online and use online activities, discussions, and interaction to study a topic. Moodle also enables teachers to differentiate learning opportunities for students. Online discussion and collaboration can operate independently as needed, thereby allowing for a more individualized approach to student learning.

### **Tapping Resources**

Educators can tap into a broad base of open materials that can enrich classroom instruction. Teachers can take advantage of materials provided by nonprofit organizations such as museums that upload digital images, videos, and audio materials to the Internet for use by the public. For example, the Underground Railroad Freedom Center ([www.freedomcenter.org/expand-your-knowledge/educator-resources/elearning](http://www.freedomcenter.org/expand-your-knowledge/educator-resources/elearning)) is partnering with schools to enhance classroom teaching and learning by offering broadcast-quality videos that can supplement learning activities. Using digital video in the classroom allows students to understand complex themes, facilitates differentiated instruction, and increases student engagement. Middle and high school students from around the world can participate in a flat classroom, using Web 2.0 tools to communicate (<http://flatclassrooms.ning.com>). Students study topics in the Thomas Friedman book, *The World Is Flat* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005). The site includes resources, tools, and a community for educators to learn how to create a flat classroom project.

These tools facilitate self-organization among educators and learners, providing a bottom-up option for collaborative learning to

complement existing centrally organized and designed learning networks. New teachers will have enhanced skills, and these skills will come together to “amplify” the organization, creating new organizational capabilities and stretching traditional organizational boundaries. If given the opportunity, these individuals can become organizational “superheroes,” reshaping the organization with their collective enhanced capabilities to use social networks, data and evidence, and collaborative processes (KnowledgeWorks 2009).

### **Remaining Challenges**

Despite this trend, multiple challenges remain. Success in open source and other collaborative contexts requires fostering a deep sense of community. Many districts maintain firewalls that prohibit teachers’ access to many open education resources and materials or online learning communities. And the capacity to upload resources through the Internet has also created a whole new marketplace for curricular materials and lesson plans, undermining open education resources all together. A front-page article in *The New York Times* discussed the new market for teachers to sell their lesson plans online and the philosophical question of whether this is ethical or whether school districts should get a share of the profits if their resources were used (Hu 2009). Earlier this year, the State College Area School District board in Pennsylvania approved a proposal to claim copyright on any output created by a teacher with direct or indirect support from the school (See Mahon 2010).

At least half of our discussions about teaching in the 21st century are about dealing with technology. The conversation should be about the future of teaching because technology has altered how we communicate. The web has become a collection of vibrant communities — online public squares where teachers can make connections across classroom walls and begin to shift their engagement with curricula from a consumer mode toward one of production. On the fringes, teachers have been self-organizing to share curriculum. They *are collaborating* to develop curricula relevant to their students and to 21st-century life. Teachers *are experimenting* with creative ways to engage students by leveraging the dynamics of networks and using participatory media. System leaders and teacher preparation programs are responsible for supporting and leveraging the new capabilities of the next generation of teachers. ■

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