

EVALUATING SOCIAL-WEB PROJECTS



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Many teachers are modifying their practices and making innovations in the areas of learning, teaching, and evaluation. Some of those practices are based on information and communications technologies (ICT) aimed, in particular, at equipping students and enabling them to take advantage of the opportunities inherent in various Web applications. These applications, which are the result of developments alternatively called the social Web (CEFRIO, 2010), Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005) or the participative Web (OECD, 2007), are characterized mainly by functionalities allowing for communication, participation, cooperation, and sharing activities.

The explosion in the number of social-Web tools, as well as the increasing popularity of social networks and media, has encouraged some teachers to experiment with activities supported by those tools. As concerns our project in particular, we focused on activities conducted with the help of blogs, microblogs, and wikis.

The integration of technology into teaching inevitably raises questions about online posts and the fact that students' work can be read by individuals other than the teacher. In addition to the criteria used to measure academic performance, other factors—tool functionalities, digital identity (traces left online, whether consciously or not, by Web surfers) and digital ethics (respect for intellectual property, citation of sources, etc.)—must also be considered. The type of learning evaluation conducted during and after students complete their assignments must therefore be changed (evaluation methods, frequency, and instruments, as well as performance standards).

The goal of the “Évaluation des productions issues de l'intégration pédagogique d'outils du Web social”¹ project was to provide college teachers with adjustable evaluation grids for use in evaluating student social-Web projects.

SOME SOCIAL-WEB TOOLS AND EXAMPLES OF THEIR USE IN EDUCATION

BLOGS

Blogs allow various types of content (text, hyperlinks, images, sounds, and videos) to be shared in a user-friendly environment. These personal Websites, which may be kept by more than one author, are easy to update, and readers can often comment on the articles posted. Those articles can be classified and identified by keyword to facilitate searches; it is also generally possible to browse the archives, which are usually arranged by month of posting.

Ease of posting and access to artifacts via the archival system are just some of the advantages of blogs as teaching tools. Moreover, many teachers use blogs to post information for students (thoughts, links, text, student assignments); thereby sharing the latest information on their particular field.

The educational advantages of blogs increase when students themselves are asked to write articles, whether by themselves or as a group. Depending on the type of activity in question, they may actually describe how they have developed a given competency; accordingly, they will have an opportunity to enhance their Webcasting abilities (incorporating hyperlinks, images, videos, etc.) and get useful feedback.

Student Blogs

Choosing to use student blogs allows all students to write their own Web content, making decisions on appearance and adding links to other sites of interest.

Sample activities involving student blogs:

- Publishing a portfolio
- Keeping a log
- Posting lecture notes
- Posting research findings

¹ A total of 21 people, including 16 from the college community, took part in the study, which was made possible by the Programme de recherche et d'expérimentation pédagogiques du réseau de l'enseignement collégial. The report may be consulted at [<http://iteractive.ca/evaluationwebsocial>].



Classroom Blogs

In a classroom blog, all students are able to post articles in the same blog. Where the goal differs from those associated with the use of an individual blog, a classroom blog can be used as a collective log (for sharing individual experiences, documenting group experiences, and staying in touch with other students in the same year, teachers, or family (in the case of an internship abroad), etc.).

Classroom blogs allow students to post a number of different individual contributions, not necessarily the collective outcome of a group endeavour.

Sample activities involving classroom blogs:

- Holding discussions with industry partners
- Keeping an internship log
- Posting photo reports
- Writing field-specific articles
- Sharing thoughts and discussions

MICROBLOGS

The microblog concept was popularized by Twitter in 2007. Other tools, such as EnDirect and Status.net, as well as custom-designed platforms that meet the needs of a given community, also exist. The main feature of microblogs is that posts (called “tweets”) consist of a limited number of characters. On Twitter, tweets are limited to a maximum of 140 characters, including punctuation and any added links. Twitter also allows for the use of hashtags,² which help identify posts.

The use of microblogs in the field of education is a relatively recent phenomenon, especially as the practice consists of posting student content. Some teachers encourage their students to use microblogging to create a network in their area of study, and potentially to contact future employers. Twitter is an information-monitoring tool that also helps students access different reserves of information that can complement traditional sources.

Sample activities involving microblogs:

- Debating
- Participating in joint writing projects
- Writing in compliance with set limits

WIKIS

Wikis allow for joint content development. Subjects are discussed in interlinked articles that are written in a relatively user-friendly environment: authors can easily add hyperlinks, images, tables, formatting elements, and so on. In most cases, there is a discussion space in which contributors can exchange information and ideas on the subject in question (usually displayed in a tab linked to the article).

Sample activities involving wikis:

- Jointly developing knowledge
- Publishing a portfolio
- Drafting collective articles
- Drafting scientific articles
- Iterative writing

The teachers mentioned that they had very much enjoyed reading student posts, and that their students had seemed to realize those posts were being read by people other than the teacher.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT TOOL

Whether or not ICT are used, the starting point remains the competency, competency element, or ability to be developed in a given course or program approach. In other words, there is no reason to use a technological tool merely because it is trendy. Once project goals have been properly established, teachers can explore the affordances offered by the tools available and find the one that best meets needs (and not the reverse). The educational intent must always take precedence over technology (REFAD, 2011). At a 2010 conference, in fact, Mark Prensky cautioned against overinvesting in any one tool, because the technology is changing too quickly.

TEACHER COMMENTS

The teachers who took part in our research project answered several questions about the use of social-Web educational tools. In addition to being consulted on the types of activities and evaluations conducted, they also provided input on the following points.

² A hashtag consists of a string of characters (usually one or more words strung together) preceded by the pound sign (#), which automatically creates a link to tweets containing the hashtag. Real-world events often make use of hashtags so that people who are unable to attend can follow what is going on.



Pros and Cons

- Giving feedback throughout the process makes it possible to better regulate learning and reduce correction time during the final evaluation.
- Although some teachers claimed the process was more burdensome, others said it had been facilitated by the tools selected.

Training Students on Social-Web Tools

- Most students received basic instruction on how to post using a given tool.
- As some teachers took it upon themselves to post student assignments submitted in another format (a Word document or an e-mail, for example), they did not actually provide such instruction.

Digital Identity

- Posting online to a broad audience helps students create a positive digital identity.
- Some students realized the impact of their posts on their own.

Digital Ethics

- A few teachers took advantage of the opportunity to discuss subjects such as confidentiality, conduct and ethics, both formally and informally.
- Because using the work of others is more difficult when it has been made public (14 out of 21 cases), fewer cases of plagiarism were identified by the teachers.

The teachers mentioned that they had very much enjoyed reading student posts, and that their students had seemed to realize those posts were being read by people other than the teacher. They were also aware of the concept of “media literacy”, even though the term was not used by most. For them, the activities suggested constituted exceptional opportunities for exploring subjects such as digital identity, confidentiality, digital ethics, and copyright.

EVALUATING SOCIAL-WEB PROJECTS

In its policy on learning evaluation, the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec [Quebec Department of Education] defines evaluation as “the process whereby a judgment is made on a

student’s learning on the basis of information gathered, analyzed and interpreted, for the purpose of making pedagogical and administrative decisions” (2003, 8). The MEQ then goes on to say that this process has two primary purposes:

- Support for learning—i.e., a diagnostic assessment conducted at the beginning of a learning sequence, or the regulation of learning and teaching processes in order to foster students’ progress;
- The recognition of competencies—i.e., the assessment of competency development for the purposes of end-of-cycle progress reports and certification of studies.

There are a number of different evaluation instruments. Those mentioned below were used in this research project to evaluate abilities and competencies. As the next section shows, they are equally useful in evaluating activities supported by social-Web tools.

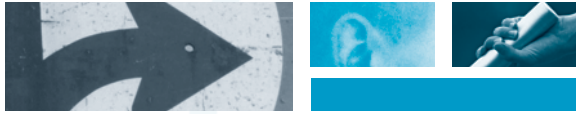
CHECKLIST

A checklist allows for a formative evaluation by teachers or students, who can then initiate a process of self-evaluation. It is composed of a series of statements the evaluator may use in relation to the activity in question. Ideally, these statements are factual, but may also require a judgment (see [Figure 1](#)).

FIGURE 1		EXCERPT FROM A CHECKLIST	
		Yes	No
• Article complies with length requirements (between 350 and 450 words).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Article has a catchy, meaningful title.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Article has been assigned to a category (several, if necessary).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Article contains at least one hyperlink to an external reference.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

EVALUATION GRIDS

An evaluation grid is an instrument for evaluating learning based on a scale that may be standard (same levels for all criteria) or descriptive (levels vary with criterion, which often amounts to a description of behaviour) (Lavoie and Larochelle, 2010). According to Scallon (2001), a descriptive scale is more appropriate in the case of formative evaluations, as it allows students to better understand the nature of their mistakes and take them into account during the summative evaluation. For



example, when assessing a criterion such as adjusting text to a blog context, the following descriptive scale is more accurate than one going from “rarely” to “always” (see Figure 2).

EXCERPT FROM A DESCRIPTIVE-SCALE EVALUATION GRID	
FIGURE 2	
Adjusting Text to Blog Context (Check box corresponding to level reached)	
• Content has not been simplified; sentences and paragraphs are too long, and no hyperlinks have been used.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Paragraphs are long and ideas are poorly organized.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Ideas are properly organized, but are not identified by means of meaningful headings.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Article is clear, concise, easy to read and well-structured; sections are identified by means of headings	<input type="checkbox"/>

SUGGESTED EVALUATION TOOLS

After selecting the social-Web tool that best supports the activity to be used in developing a certain competency, teachers could choose from among the statements or criteria proposed, and add an evaluation tool that takes account of the disciplinary aspect. They might also do the same thing and then suggest that students evaluate themselves. In order to choose the most appropriate criteria for the project, teachers should ask the following questions.

- **Should I evaluate all posts?**
While it is relevant to read all posts, students might be asked to select only those of which they are most proud and which they wish to submit to a summative evaluation.
- **Should I evaluate the process?**
The evaluation of a competency often involves observing a process and the adjustments made by students, not only the final product.
- **Should I evaluate interaction?**
Whether this is done formally or informally, monitoring student discussions (content, contribution to the post, sharing of information, sharing of content) is sufficient.

Once having considered these questions, teachers will be in a position to choose the evaluation instruments or criteria that best meet their needs, and given them the appropriate weighting. Using all criteria proposed might make the correction aspect considerably more cumbersome.

Although many teachers feel it necessary to give points for participation and number of posts, the criteria proposed do not take these aspects into account. It should also be noted that most institutional student-evaluation policies (PIEA, in Quebec) prohibit giving points for participation, and the Commission d’évaluation de l’enseignement collégial (CEEC) feels giving points for participation is at odds with the competency approach: What should be assessed is the competency targeted by each individual course, and evaluating participation would run counter to this principle. Evaluations should bear more on quality than quantity.

Given that the number of tools suggested is relatively high, the examples presented in the following section are excerpts only. All the tools concerned are available online at [<http://interactive.ca/evaluationwebsocial>].

EXAMPLE: EVALUATING A WIKI PROJECT

Evaluating a wiki post may pose a problem, since this tool offers the most functionalities for knowledge co-development. With blogs and microblogs, a post’s author is easily identifiable; with a wiki, however, each participant’s contribution must be determined, and its impact and quality, measured. We should therefore distinguish between evaluations of wiki articles written individually and those composed by a group. As regards the former, only the article need be evaluated, while, in the latter case, attention must be paid to all contributors to the final product.

To begin, a self-evaluation grid can be distributed to students. An excerpt of such a grid is presented in Figure 3.

EXCERPT FROM WIKI-ARTICLE SELF-EVALUATION GRID		Yes	No
FIGURE 3			
• Article’s title is representative of content.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
• Article is divided into sections.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
• Sections are clearly identified by informative headings.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
• Where appropriate, article contains hyperlinks to complementary information.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
• Where appropriate, article contains images or videos.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
• Images and videos are copyright-free.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
• Article is properly incorporated into rest of wiki.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	



To arrive at an evaluation that allows students to properly grasp the nature of their mistakes, teachers can use a descriptive-scale evaluation grid to evaluate wiki articles, whether the latter have been composed by one or several students (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4 EXCERPT FROM WIKI-ARTICLE DESCRIPTIVE-SCALE EVALUATION GRID	
Respect for Topic (Check box corresponding to level reached)	
• Article is off-topic.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Several topic-related components are missing.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Most topic-related components are discussed, but some lack detail or are beyond scope of topic.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• All main topic-related facts and components are discussed, without going beyond scope of topic.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Article Neutrality (Check box corresponding to level reached)	
• Article fails to hide author's opinion, substantially lacks objectivity, or contains inaccuracies.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Article fails to hide author's opinion.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Article facts are accurate, but choice of facts presented lacks objectivity.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Article is not controversial in terms of neutrality, and contains no inaccuracies.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Wiki Suitability (Check box corresponding to level reached)	
• Article does not take account of wiki writing context, or text structure is lacking.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Themes discussed in article are poorly divided into sections.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Article content is well written and divided, but introductory summary is inappropriate or absent.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Article complies with wiki style conventions: it is properly divided into sections and contains introductory summary and table of contents that are complete without being too long.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Where an article has more than one author, in addition to evaluating the final product, discussion-space contributions should perhaps be assessed before evaluating the contribution of each student (see Figure 5).

Teachers could also incorporate criteria allowing for the evaluation of each student's contribution (see Figure 6); these criteria could be added to the grid in Figure 4.

FIGURE 5 EXCERPT FROM WIKI-ARTICLE UNIFORM-SCALE EVALUATION GRID				
	1*	2	3	4
• Contributions are consistent with article content.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Contributions take account of previous contributions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Discussion-tab remarks are civil, even when not in agreement with content or previous contributions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Contributions contain new material, delve deeper into ideas, or raise new questions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Contributions are designed to advance discussion and stimulate reflection.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

* 1) Rarely or Never; 2) Occasionally; 3) Often; 4) Always

FIGURE 6 EXCERPT FROM WIKI-ARTICLE DESCRIPTIVE-SCALE EVALUATION GRID	
Reactions to Contributions (Check box corresponding to level reached)	
• Student does not take contributions by other authors into account.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Student occasionally incorporates contributions by other authors.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Student generally incorporates contributions by other authors.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Student uses contributions by other authors as a basis, and makes adjustments where necessary. He/she asks for input in order to put it to use later.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student's Willingness to Help Others (Check box corresponding to level reached)	
• Student fails to take account of discussion-space remarks, and does not contribute to discussion.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Student simply makes use of information proposed by co-authors, without participating in discussions or stimulating reflection.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Student helps stimulate reflection, but at last minute only, with result that all students are unable to benefit. He/she suggests a few possible avenues or solutions.	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Student shares outcome of his/her reflection in order to improve the final result. He/she takes account of others' comments and suggests possible avenues or solutions as soon as possible, so others can take advantage of them.	<input type="checkbox"/>



CONCLUSION

While the number of teachers wishing to make innovations and incorporate ICT into their practices seems to have grown over the past years, the number of those who are actually getting their students involved in posting on the social Web remains relatively low. This fact may be explained by the lack of classroom resources, hesitation about posting imperfect projects, or a lack of support.

The goal of our study was to facilitate evaluation by providing access to evaluation criteria that can be used by teachers wishing to incorporate social-Web tools into their educational activities. In making the evaluation process for this type of assignment more formal, teachers may be more inclined to initiate classroom use of ICT. They can use the evaluation tools suggested to develop whatever criteria they feel are most relevant, and add other criteria to assess the learning objective and elements of the competency they want their students to acquire.

[...] with a wiki, each participant's contribution must be determined, and its impact and quality, measured. We should therefore distinguish between evaluations of wiki articles written individually and those composed by a group.

Completing projects with the aid of social-Web tools gives students an opportunity to access learning situations with which they can identify, while developing competencies related to ICT use, problem solving, research, and the organization and presentation of information. In this way, teachers place students in situations in which they will have to marshal their knowledge, abilities, and attitudes in order to understand that situation, analyze facts, and create content.

The criteria proposed in this article were developed thanks to the expertise and generosity of teachers who agreed to share their success stories and deliberations. We hope these suggestions will be of use to you and improve your practices. ♦

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