

Places to Go: Robin Good's Master New Media

by Stephen Downes

e-Learning is moving beyond the domains of the learning management system. This shift is congruent with the idea that students, instead of being mere receivers of learning content, are active participants in the learning process, tasked as much with creativity as with consumption. Schools and universities are beginning to experiment with weblogs; London's [Ravensbourne College](#) has even organized its Web site using a [wiki](#), thereby allowing collective authoring and updating of the site by different segments of the campus community.

Educators will make much of this new approach to e-learning in the months to come, an approach that is sometimes called "e-learning 2.0," which reflects the widely discussed "Web 2.0" (MacManus and Porter, [2005](#)). As [RSS](#) feeds have allowed designers to publish countless combinations of non-localized, aggregated, and cross-referenced content on their sites, Web 2.0 designates a whole array of associated trends and practices that have transformed our relationship with the Internet. Rather than being thought of as a medium, the Internet is now being thought of as something more akin to a computing platform; as a result, previous notions of what a Web site entails have quickly become outdated in light of the more dynamic and dispersed forms of online publishing currently available. However, as the foundations shift, where does the educator turn to stay abreast of developments in this rapidly changing environment? This issue's place to go is a Web site that not only talks Web 2.0 but also lives it: Robin Good's [Master New Media](#). As educators seek new ways to realize the potential of Web 2.0 in the design of their online courses, this site will provide a valuable source of information and inspiration in their efforts.

The brainchild of Robin Good, Master New Media specializes in online content production, sharing, and collaboration. In its organization, the site is the front for an assortment of resources that looks daunting at first glimpse but reveals layer after layer of depth and insight. Even the name of the site is complex. The site is actually one of three interlinked sites designed by Good: [Master New Media](#) (the most comprehensive of the three), [Kolabra](#) (specifically dealing with online collaboration technologies), and [Master Views International](#) (specifically dealing with PowerPoint presentations). While each site provides access to its own rich array of new and archived articles, Master New Media contains select articles from its two sister sites as well as a wealth of current news items and other resources. Such an elaborate design is one of the hallmarks of new sites seeking to utilize the full potential of new technologies associated with Web 2.0.

Perhaps the best view of what is offered here is via the [site map](#) link located at the top of the Master New Media home page, which (under the title "Vista Points") lists the bulk of the site's articles under selected category headings. The designated topics in this listing include [Independent Publishing](#), [Information Design and Data Visualization](#), [Digital Imaging](#), [Search Tools and Technologies](#), [Content Delivery and Distribution](#), [Intellectual Property](#), [Learning—Educational Technologies](#), [Online Collaboration](#), [Online Marketing](#), and more. These category listings can also be accessed by links under specific articles on the Master New Media home page as well as via the navigation bar that appears at the right of each article when it is viewed in full.

On the [Master New Media](#) home page, the reader is greeted with two long columns: on the left, a series of miscellaneous articles, listed most recent first (in other words, like a blog); and on the right, a list of recent articles from the Kolabra and Master Views International sites as well as a "Reference" section that lists the three most recent articles under each of the category headings mentioned above. It is worth noting that each category has its own RSS feed, easily identifiable in the category listings (though, oddly, not on the site map page). Readers looking specifically for a blog will find one by clicking on the [Weblog](#) link at the top of the page, which provides access to the Sharewood Tidings portion of the site. This page displays a series of

posts; each post doubles as an article, and the whole article (of which the post is about a third) can be read by clicking on the "Continue reading..." link placed below the post.

If the site design sounds chaotic, it is and deliberately so. No entry into the site looks the same, and no way of viewing the site replicates exactly the same content as any other. How viewers enter the site determines what they see, and because of the chaotic organization, they will likely find new paths of discovery beyond what they were initially looking for. Hence, for example, when people interested in e-learning enter the site, they usually visit the [Learning—Educational Technologies](#) section. Educators reading this section will find themselves on the cutting edge after reading examinations of the [role of amateur online video in learning](#), [3D virtual spaces for learning and collaboration](#), or [definitions of training](#).

Opening one of the articles—the article on amateur online video, for example—gets the reader to the meat of Robin Good's content. Here, in contrast to the paragraphs of unrelenting text typical of most online content sites, a mixture of different font sizes, text, and images assault the reader. Viewers can read a Robin Good article in just a few seconds by scanning the large text, or they can linger longer, reading every word. The articles, meanwhile, lavishly provide links to more content, allowing deeper exploration as desired. A list of related articles appears to the left, and a space for reader comments is deployed at the bottom of the page. Readers will also notice that the articles listed under any given category often come from other categories—Web 2.0 does not respect rigid hierarchies; it promotes free exploration of new topics at every turn.

Though Robin Good has authored the vast majority of the 4,000 articles on the site, readers will notice that he has culled information from sources around the Internet. Good thus functions on this site as what he calls a "newsmaster":

The newsmaster is an individual capable of personally crafting RSS-based specialized information channels by utilizing technologies that allow [him or her] to select, aggregate, filter, exclude and identify quality news, information, content, tools and resources from the whole universe of content, news, and information available on the Internet.

News mastering is the ability of a human being to concert, orchestrate, edit, and refine quality search formulas that tap into the whole Internet content universe and beyond, and that filter out relevant information through selected keywords, source selection, ranking, heuristics, and many other possible criteria ([2004](#), under "So What is a Newsmaster?" ¶ 1).

Using his own network of sources, Good aggregates relevant content, repurposes it, and feeds it through the bewildering array of services that constitute his Web site. "This is a 'hose,'" he writes, "from which useful information around a tightly defined topic can be extracted every day or as soon as there is something of value out there. It is a hose from which other people can quench their knowledge thirst. My unique personal filtering effort becomes useful for everyone" ([2004](#), under "A New Digital Professional Role," para. 6).

Though content, once created, remains in Robin Good's ever increasing library, and hence is always available for reference, readers trying to grasp the Robin Good site as though it were a static resource will quickly feel as if they are trying to hold water. But through this analogy, the reader begins to understand that a site such as Robin Good serves not so much as a repository of static articles and other content, but rather as a fountain of constantly new and relevant information, and that the way to benefit most from a site like this is not to amass such knowledge but rather to sample it, to drink it in as it becomes available, to rework it and repurpose it, and to pass it along again in similar fashion. Robin Good's Web site is not a place where

readers go get information; it is a place where information stays briefly on its frenzied journey to a new destination.

After having subscribed to some of the many RSS feeds (or the e-mail newsletters) and drinking from this fountain for a while, the online educator will begin to wonder, upon returning to staid, static and lifeless online courses, why e-learning remains mired in the world of 1.0 when the world of 2.0 beckons, so persuasively, just beyond the horizon.

References

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