Web 2.0 provides rich opportunities to improve student learning. Web 2.0 technologies significantly contribute to furthering personalised, collaborative learning and support the development of internet literacy.

Web 2.0 is a term used to describe popular internet sites such as Facebook, del.icio.us, Flickr, YouTube, wikis and blogs. These sites are characterised by the online activities that they facilitate:

- identity and user generated content (Blogs and wikis allow users to establish online identities and publish their own content.)
- social bookmarking (Sites like del.icio.us allow people to share bookmarks online.)
- social networking (Sites like Facebook allow people to network online.)
- access to rich media. (Sites like YouTube and Flickr provide a vast array of rich media content such as videos and pictures.)

Research has suggested that embedding Web 2.0 activities improves student learning in areas such as:

- increased participation, particularly quieter students who can work collaboratively online
- participation in online discussion outside school
- extended learning through further investigation
- sense of ownership and engagement through publishing work online.

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Barriers to Web 2.0 adoption

Further research has shown that teachers face a number of barriers to effective use of Web 2.0 in teaching and learning:

- lack of knowledge or confidence in Web 2.0
- lack of safe places to gain experience with Web 2.0 tools
- concerns about cybersafety and cyber bullying
- limited bandwidth
- inflexibility of school site blocking systems.

Cybersafety and site blocking

Web 2.0 site blocking in schools is a risk management response to the difficult and poorly understood issues that schools face in trying to balance cybersafety concerns with the desire to harness innovative Web 2.0 style collaborative teaching and learning.

Schools have a fundamental duty of care to students and site blocking is a necessary and key component of every school’s overall cybersafety strategy.

Site blocking has a clear role in protecting students from illegal and inappropriate internet sites and content. For schools with limited bandwidth, site blocking is also used as a method to limit download of bandwidth-heavy rich media content.

School policy makers face a dilemma in deciding what to do with popular Web 2.0 sites such as Wikipedia, Facebook and YouTube. Typically these sites provide a mixture of both educationally valuable and undesirable/risky content and interactivity.

Most school jurisdictions choose to block these Web 2.0 sites by default but provide mechanisms for individual schools to unblock selected sites. Many teachers have expressed frustration at the processes and technologies associated with Web 2.0 site blocking.

Check out the Australian Government’s cybersafety plan www.dbcde.gov.au
Individual educators can help to overcome some of these barriers by:

- Gaining personal expertise and experience through regular use of popular Web 2.0 sites.
- Collaborating with other educators to identify, share and promote best practice in the development and implementation of Web 2.0-related learning activities.
- Implementing local Web 2.0 tools into the school Intranet as a safe place to trial and learn.

School principals and policy makers have a key role to play in developing best practice models for Web 2.0-style online learning. Research indicates that successful adoption of Web 2.0 in schools is characterised by:

- School principal-driven philosophy for innovation in online learning
- Investment in empowering teachers with Web 2.0 interest and expertise
- Commitment to teaching digital literacy and cybersafety as part of the curriculum
- Clear Internet behavior policies and close involvement and communication with parents.
- Sufficient internet bandwidth to allow generous access to rich media content.
- Fine-grained Internet filtering capability that allows access policy decisions and implementation to be quickly and easily devolved to individual schools and teachers
- Allowing student access to selected popular Web 2.0 Internet sites within the bounds of clearly defined acceptable behavior agreements and active monitoring.
- Deploying Web 2.0 interactive tools (such as blogs, wikis and social networking) internally onto school Intranets as a safe place to trial and learn.
- Facilitating safe access to educationally-relevant rich media content from popular Web 2.0 sites that would normally be blocked.

Ways forward

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) undertakes a number of activities to promote cybersafety. www.acma.gov.au
Further information

This Hot topICT is based on a report prepared by Education.au for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations as part of the Strategic ICT Advisory Service. The primary purpose of the advisory service is to investigate the current and future impacts of emerging technologies and to provide strategic advice to assist policy makers to address the implications of implementation of new technologies in education and training.

Read the full report on Web 2.0 Site blocking in schools:
http://www.educationau.edu.au/SICTAS/nsi