

THE BOOKSHELF

Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations

by Clay Shirky

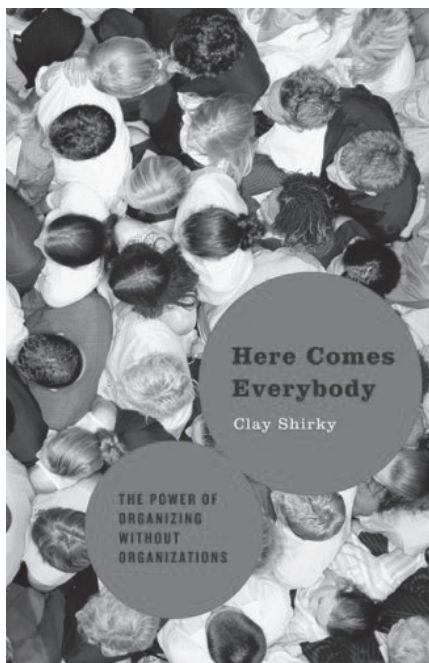
(available in paperback, Feb., 2009)

~ REVIEWED BY PEGGY HARVEY

When 4th-grade classes use the Internet to research pond animals in the computer lab at my school, the lessons learned are often unexpected. Students quickly discover that hits for “sunfish” might give information about sailboat races, or that “blue heron” may yield a café menu. Although I discourage them from launching their research on Wikipedia, search engines frequently leads them there, and then things can get really interesting.

Wikipedia almost always provides the most accurate, thorough results, a fact that the students instantly recognize and appreciate. But the open-source nature of Wikipedia disturbs many teachers who question its validity and suspect its lack of editorial process. In one Wikipedia search on my watch, a student read that his pond animal, a bull frog, eats “cupcakes and popcorn.” Experiences with tam-

pered entries like that prompt many schools to block access to Wikipedia, along with many other Web 2.0 services, including Youtube and Facebook. So while Web 2.0 tools revolutionize our world, educators



often refuse to acknowledge them.

But according to sociologist and author Clay Shirky, the Web 2.0 revolution must be embraced. The arguments presented in his book, *Here Comes Everybody*, are enough to convince any educator that the social order is changing, and schools have no choice but to jump on the bandwagon. The changes won’t necessarily be easy, says Shirky, but they are unavoidable. “We are living in the middle of a huge increase in the number of tools available,” Shirky writes, a phenomenon that he says is not necessarily an improvement to modern society, but a challenge that must be acknowledged. Blocking access to Web 2.0 tools in our schools is not going to make them go away.

I read *Here Comes Everybody* after it was recommended by Will Richardson at the MassCUE conference, and I’m glad I did. Shirky’s numerous examples and stories demonstrating how society is being transformed by the Internet have further convinced me that educators must be proactive about incorporating Web 2.0 tools into their curriculum. The advantages, he says, are significant. Comparing the ongoing revolution to the invention of the printing press, Shirky touts the “mass amateurization” afforded by the Internet. You no longer have to be a professional publisher to publish, or a professional editor to edit. Shirky convincingly notes that we’re “living in the middle of the largest increase in expressive capability in the history of the human race.”

If you have any doubts, *Here Comes Everybody* makes it clear

Peggy Harvey is the Technology & Media Specialist at Harvard Elementary School in Harvard, MA. She is a graduate of Lesley University’s Masters of Technology in Education program. She can be reached at pharvey@psharvard.org.

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that we are experiencing a momentous social revolution. We can now effortlessly find people, form groups, and work on projects together in ways never before possible. Shirky believes that the Internet has afforded communication tools, and social patterns to fit those tools, that are a natural fit for our native desires and talents for group effort. As implied by the book's title, everybody can get together like never before because technology has collapsed "transaction costs."

The rapidly developing social tools allow tremendous possibilities for collaboration. Wikipedia, Shirky notes, is a perfect example of "collaborative production." One chapter of *Here Comes Everybody* chronicles the fascinating account of the birth of Wikipedia, an enterprise that initially was to include an editorial process. Ultimately Wikipedia was successful because the editorial process was removed. The "publish, then filter" pattern used with Wikipedia and other open source software significantly reduces the cost of failure, says Shirky.

In addition, collaborative efforts have been proven to work. There are more than enough people who care to share their knowledge, monitor information, and challenge inaccuracies. Within an hour of reading a false Wikipedia entry about the diet of bullfrogs, I noted that the entry had been corrected. The student learned not just about bullfrogs, but to think critically, consult other sources, and understand the nature of open-source web sites. Wikis pose the basic philosophical question, "who will guard the guardians?" The answer, Shirky reveals, is everyone.

So what is the upshot of Shirky's theories on the teaching profession? Beyond the clear changes that have impacted the way students learn, teachers now have the ability to connect with others as never before. After traditionally working in relative isolation, classroom teachers and other school staff can now easily participate in dynamic, online communities of educators around the world, sharing ideas and classroom experiences as never before.

At Classroom2.0, a social networking site for people interested in collaborative learning, educators can join wiki discussion forums to exchange ideas, "at-

tend" webinars, and participate in Classroom 2.0 LIVE, a weekly online event where educators can use the audio, chat, video, and desktop sharing tools to learn in real-time with other educators around the world. Access to this, and other Web 2.0 sites for educators, such as PBS's Teacherline and The Teachers' Podcast, is transforming professional development models. Online connections can have a significant impact on teaching practices in a multitude of ways, including providing extensive access to professional development opportunities. But first teachers need to learn how to navigate the online world.

While there's a clear advantage to Web 2.0 tools, there is a learning curve that many educators will find daunting. Professional development designed to help teachers take advantage of these new technologies is critical. Most classroom teachers I know are either unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the types of online technologies that their students use intuitively. It's important that they be introduced to the advantages of Web 2.0 tools, and gain experience necessary to use them in their curriculum. Providing online professional development seems like an ideal way to expose teachers to those tools, while teaching them how to use them.

With free, open-access virtual learning environments like Moodle and Claroline, school districts can create, customize, and administer professional development courses. The elimination of what Shirky calls "transaction costs" translates to improved prospects for affordable professional development. Keeping up with the breakneck pace of technologies is a serious challenge to educators, but thanks to those technologies, the availability of professional development options has never been greater. ▲▼

Sources:

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