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[Larry Magid at Large](#)

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Educators take Web 2.0 to school

by [Larry Magid](#)



I spent part of last week in Washington, D.C., at the annual [National Educational Computing Conference](#). The event, which celebrated its 30th anniversary this year, is sponsored by the International Society for Technology in Education ([ISTE](#)).

As you'd expect, there were plenty of workshops on the nuts and bolts of using technology in the classroom. But as technology evolves, so does the way it's used by some creative educators.

There were several sessions, for example, on how to use cell phones within the classroom. Considering that some school districts still ban students from bringing cell phones to school, it's great to see that there are enlightened teachers who are instead trying to figure out how to actually use them in the classroom.

Speaking of things that are banned in schools, I attended a session called "Classroom 2.0: What Is Web 2.0's Role in Schools?" This was particularly refreshing considering that many schools don't allow any use of social-networking sites and some districts actually employ filters that completely ban student and teacher access to MySpace, Facebook, and similar interactive sites.

Rather than fight the idea of students using the Web to communicate with each other, the presenters at this event were encouraging it. Chris Lehman, the principal of [Science Leadership Academy](#) in Philadelphia, talked about the use of interactive technology in schools as part of a "collaborative culture" that he says is likely to be

with us for a long time.

"Whether it's a wiki or Twitter, the notion of a participatory culture--upstream and downstream--is not going away," he told the audience. A wiki is a Web site that can be updated and edited by any of its participants. Unlike traditional publishing tools, it encourages collaboration.

Panel member [Vicki Davis](#), a teacher from Camilla, Ga., demonstrated what could be the ultimate--one could say subversive--tool for changing the nature of participation in the classroom. During the event, she encouraged the audience to sign into what she calls a "back channel," which is basically a chat session going on while the panelists were speaking. People both in the room and those not attending NECC were able to comment, in real time, about what the panelists were saying via the free [Chatzy](#) service.

I've seen similar technology used at numerous conferences, but Davis says she uses it in her high-school classes. What a change from when I grew up, when it was an infraction to pass notes back and forth during class. Back then, students were punished for trying to collaborate. Of course, the technology has to be used appropriately with students staying on topic. But that should be true for any subject-oriented chat or forum. Even adults sometimes get mad at each other for going "off topic."

Such back channels also make it possible for people to say less-than-kind things about the person speaking, which can be either good or bad, depending upon your perspective. I've been to conferences where lots of people have used Twitter to comment on what was said at the podium. At one event I heard laughter after someone tweeted a funny, but cutting remark about the speaker. It seemed like the only person in the room not in on the joke was the speaker himself.

If this technology is used in school, I would hope that the students feel free to make critical comments about the subject matter but practice good online citizenship by refraining from insulting the speaker and each other.

Whether in school, the workplace or personal life, the use of interactive technology can sometimes get a little messy. But the same can be said about almost anything worthwhile. Just as we don't avoid physical education because kids sometimes skin their knees or refrain from art projects because kids can get their hands dirty, we

shouldn't let the risks keep us from embracing Web 2.0 technology in school.

This post was adapted from a [column](#) in the San Jose Mercury News.



Larry Magid has been a technology columnist and broadcaster for more than two decades as well as a leading Internet safety advocate.