



Using Online Tools to Connect, Collaborate and Practice

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Key words: gjcpp tools, Web 2.0, collaboration, community practice.

Recommended citation:

Brunson, L., & Valentine, D. (2010). Using online tools to connect, collaborate and practice. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, 1(2), 1-8. Retrieved <date>, from <http://www.gjcpp.org/>.

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Introduction

A recent report from the Pew Research Center suggests that online activities are becoming an increasingly popular way for people to keep informed about what is happening in their community (Smith, 2010). While many of us may know about social media such as [Facebook](#), [MySpace](#), [Twitter](#), and [LinkedIn](#), we may be less certain how to integrate these tools into our community work. There are many ways in which interactive “Web 2.0” sites and services create possibilities for relationship building, information-sharing, and collaboration. In this column, we highlight some of the ways in which these tools can be used for community practice and community building.

We hope that this column will spur some creative thinking and exploration about how you can use Web 2.0 in your community work – and that you will tell us about them! Please leave a comment below about your favorite sites and services and how you use them. Welcome!

What is Web 2.0?

The terms “social media,” “Web 2.0,” “the participatory Web,” and “the read-write Web” are general terms that do not refer to a specific technology, but rather to a growing trend in the use of interactive features within Internet web sites (O’Reilly, 2005; “Web 2.0,” 2010). While early versions of Internet technology provided access to enormous amounts of information through document and media storage, hyperlinks, and search engines, these functions were based on simple information posting by a site administrator and subsequent retrieval by a user. Newer tools allow Internet users to go beyond merely retrieving information to interacting around and easily contributing content of their own. User-generated content is often in text form – such as comments, blogs, and documents— but it can also include images, maps, audio, video, or metadata such as ratings or tags. Participation is now a two-way street that can take many forms.

These newer “Web 2.0” tools add a layer of interactivity that promotes participation and collaboration. People can link to networks of other people who share their interests, receive signals about new information, and then bookmark, tag, evaluate and comment on these resources (Eysenbach, 2008). These functions turn the Internet from a document storage system into a dynamic platforms where

“authoring creates content, links and tags knit it together, and search, extensions, tags and signals make emergent structures and patterns in the content visible, and help people stay on top of it all” (McAfee, 2006). In addition, mobile devices increasingly make these resources available when and where it is needed.

Why should community psychologists be interested in these tools?

- For one, many community practice projects involve people living and working across multiple sites. It is frequently challenging to schedule face-to-face meetings and coordinate collaborative work. Many social media and Web 2.0 tools can help bridge the times between face-to-face meetings by facilitating interactions and collaboration among distributed users. They can help bridge geographical distance and schedule differences by allowing people to participate in their own time and at their own pace.
- For another reason, when well done, this type of user-centered design can provide a rich, responsive, personalized user interface that draws people in. The dynamic nature of social media allows people express themselves in playful, ongoing interactions. Information-sharing functions can also allow a group to measure

progress towards objectives and to celebrate success. So using these tools can provide more ways for groups to have fun and to share a sense of accomplishment — essential elements of community building.

- As a third reason, the values and approaches of the participatory web are in harmony with many of the values espoused by community psychologists. Web 2.0 is based on a design philosophy that values free-use and open-source resources, transparency and user control, information sharing, participation, and collaboration (“Web 2.0,” 2010). These tools can help make participation possible for greater numbers of individuals by offering a diversity of forms and levels of participation.

Tricks of the trade

Before we get into the nitty-gritty of the myriad Web 2.0 tools, here are some general principles to think about when integrating online tools into practice.

Use social media to complement face to face community building – not to replace it. While some communities thrive exclusively through virtual contact, others are more successful when they use social media to complement face-to-face interactions. Could some elements of your process (e.g., engaging youth participation, raising public awareness, sharing accomplishments) work well in a public online forum? Are there other levels of work that would be best served by face-to-face meetings and in-real-life (IRL) forums? Talk with your group about which outlets are helpful or appropriate for which purposes.

Meet where you already are. Where do you and your communities hang out online? Do they? Does your project or community-of-choice already have a “presence” online? Take what is already working in your scene and build upon it. Even if your group is filled with experienced Internet users, the proliferation of information sources may make it difficult for them to monitor any additional outlets. People quickly develop preferences for sources they prefer; find out what those are and build on them, if possible. If in-real-life (IRL) meetings are where the action is, great! You can supplement that process by posting summaries of IRL meetings in one, easy-to-read place. If some of your folks are IRL-focused and others aren’t, consider a tech-buddy system that is tied in to a phone tree. For example, online techies and IRL folks can each take on roles that resonate

with their proclivities, and set up times or situations for updating each other.

Make participation easy. Using online forums has to be easy, natural, and user-friendly, or not enough members will participate to make it lively and interesting. Choose a platform that matches your users’ technical abilities. Accessing the site and finding relevant information and functions should be possible with a minimum number of clicks. For example, rating widgets should be clearly visible at the top of a page, with a simple icon such as a thumbs up/down icon.

Keep your forum lively and up-to-date – or keep it simple. Many online group initiatives die out because not enough users participate on a regular basis, and the site is rapidly forgotten. Web sites and group forums are more likely to be used when they offer interesting and relevant information on a regular basis. Popular social networking sites may be a good choice to establish an online presence, because they are less likely to require constant maintenance. Structure is provided by the features of the site itself, and content is kept up-to-date by the individual contributions of users. However, these forums require at least a few members who contribute often enough to keep the exchanges lively, up-to-date, and interesting. Other outlets, such as web sites, can be relatively easy to set up but are less interactive. Usually one individual acts as a webmaster, and this person maintains site quality by keeping information up-to-date and weeding broken links. If you cannot allocate resources for this role, keep it simple! Include contact information, a hyperlink (so a visitor can generate an e-mail with one click), a link to your primary social media site, page or group, and a photo or logo. Some online presence is better than none, if only to provide a way for a community member (or potential funder) to find you.

Be patient and consistent. There is lots of hubbub about social networking, marketing and using the web to catalyze massive movements. As you start to experiment with new tools or expand your existing work—be patient. Trust the process and allow it to grow and change with your needs and those of your community. Keep in mind that marketing researchers have found that if you get a 2% participation response to an email or online call to action, you are doing well. Connecting and collaborating online takes practice, patience and consistency. Choose one tool, use it for a while and be sure folks find what they expect when they engage with you there.

Using Web 2.0 tools and social media for community practice

With those general principles in mind, how can Web 2.0 tools actually be used in community practice? Specific services combine different functions and information types to allow different kinds of uses. For example, functions such as searching, authoring, linking, tagging, and signaling (Eysenbach, 2008) can be combined with many different types of information: personal profiles, news, photos, maps, videos, and text. The resulting content can be shared one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many, or at large, to anyone who has access to the Internet (Acando Consulting, 2008, Freedman, 2006). The combinations can seem overwhelming! So to get some ideas flowing, here are ten specific examples of the myriad ways that Web 2.0 can be useful in community practice:

1. To communicate among group members.

Communication services such as email, instant messaging, and teleconferencing create communication networks that allow individuals and groups to communicate in real time or asynchronously. On a group basis, this allows your community to stay connected and to mobilize quickly. If group members participate regularly, these exchanges permit an ongoing dialogue that can contribute to a sense of connectedness.

- **Asynchronous** communication channels – such as email, listgroups, discussion forums and message boards – allow people to leave a message and for others to read it at their convenience. Individuals are able to communicate at the time and place that is convenient to them. Documents and listgroup exchanges can also be archived at a site available to members (e.g., Yahoo Groups, Google Groups). Most of these tools are free or low-cost. While convenient, this type of communication is sometimes dry, and participation and exchanges tend to fluctuate over time. If a group or listserv site is used, it helps to have an option where members can receive exchanges in their email inbox directly or in a daily digest form, to remind group members that the forum exists and that there is ongoing activity—and to provide an easy way to contribute.
- **Synchronous** modes of communication – such as chat, Internet telephony, and video conferencing – permit live interaction. People

get online at the same time from distant sites, and connect to a service that allows them to exchange in real time. Some services permit chats via written text (e.g., MSN Messenger); others allow voice or voice-plus-video exchanges (e.g., Skype, Oovoo, Free Conference Call). This type of communication requires participants to be available and online at the same time and to have the appropriate hardware and Internet connection. For example, videoconferencing requires a webcam and a high speed Internet connection. These tools can be very useful for online meetings (see next point).

2. To hold online meetings, presentations and training sessions.

Live communication tools can allow your group to hold meetings, presentations and even training sessions online. The combinations are endless: from simple slide-sharing to video chats to large group conference calls. Meetings can be held simply via chat or through an online conference call. More sophisticated meetings can be held using online meeting platforms that permit video connections, slideshows, document sharing, remote viewing of a presenter's desktop, and desktop sharing (e.g., Gotomeeting, Slideshare, Whiteboard). Generally speaking, the more people interacting in multiple modes, the higher the price for these services, although single-mode options (audio only, live data sharing, one-way video) can be found for low or no cost. Many paid services allow meetings and presentations to be recorded and archived so that those who are unable to attend can view them later.

3. To share brief capsules of news and information rapidly.

Social media tools can be used to rapidly distribute news and information to your community through emails, rss feeds, or micro-blogs such as Twitter. This type of mass dissemination of information has made social media of interest to marketers and public health educators (Eysenbach, 2008). On a local level, regular exchanges of relevant and interesting information help keep your group on people's radar. However, it is important to recognize that too many communications or a high percentage of off-topic posts can turn people away.

4. To record and celebrate group activities and accomplishments.

Another way to profit from online tools is to record and celebrate what your group has accomplished. A simple website or online group allows your community to explain the group's purpose, announce recent

accomplishments, and share photographs and videos of group activities. A timeline or graphic could help track progress towards shared group goals. The site could archive important documents, such as meeting minutes or group publications. These allow people who have not been able to attend an event in person to stay connected to what is happening, and provide an important form of collective memory for the group as a whole. Establishing an online presence also allows your group to be found by someone who may have heard about it and who goes online to search for it. Many email providers will host a basic website for free. Other sites, such as TakingITGlobal, offer free project spaces that may include additional features such as e-mail distribution lists, space for project members to post on their progress with photos and text, and the ability to upload project documents and files.

5. **To network.** Sites such as Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn allow people and groups to find and exchange with others who share similar personal or professional backgrounds and interests. Many of these sites incorporate micro-blogging, bite-sized capsules of self-expression that tend to generate rapid exchanges (e.g., Facebook status updates, Twitter). The dynamic nature of these exchanges facilitates humor and play, promotes participation, and allows group members to feel connected. Most social networking sites are free, and many are available in multiple languages.
6. **To gather information from members.** There are many online options for collecting information from groups of individuals. Some tools track exchanges on blogs or aggregate responses to online forums. For example, Twitter hashtags can be used as a quick way of getting people's opinions about an idea. Other services offer more formal polling and survey tools (e.g., SurveyMonkey, Ask500People). Analysis of large amounts of user data can be used to measure awareness and online usage patterns. For example, Google Analytics lets you track key words, web addresses, names, and other information across the global web and aggregates reports in a variety of forms.
7. **To allow members to express their opinion.** Blogs are a rapid form of web publishing that allow individuals to author texts and to make them available to anyone who can access the site where the blog is hosted. Bloggers post information and opinions about a specific topic in a chronological series of posts, listed with the most recent posts at the top of the page. Readers can comment and

respond, and bloggers often link to other's bloggers sites, creating networks and webs of related information. Blogs work best when there are posts made on a fairly regular basis, which may be a heavy commitment for an individual group member to take on. If the blog is associated with your group, be clear about whether content represents a single individual's opinion or the position of the group as a whole. Blogs must be hosted and usually require fees; however there are several free blogging sites such as blogspot or tumblr that are free of charge. If you want a web address that reflects your group's name, buy a domain name and pay a monthly fee to redirect the site name to a free blog site.

8. **To collaborate on authoring documents.** While blogs create one form of ongoing online discussion, other tools allow community members to work together to write and edit documents. These tools might be particularly useful for group reports or participatory research projects. A wiki is a collaborative website which can be directly edited by anyone with access. There are many services that allow your group to set up its own wiki (e.g., WikiSpaces, TiddlySpot, PBWiki, Zoho Project wikis). Another option for collaborative authoring is to use online office software. GoogleDocs provides online versions of word processing, spreadsheet, and presentation software, along with space to store the resulting files and access to those files for multiple users. Some platforms, such as Google Wave, can allow multiple participants to collaborate in real-time on written documents and other types of media (Neylon, 2009). More integrated options are offered on fee-based collaborative workspaces, which may offer features such as annotations, discussion forums, document storage and management, and group calendars. Many of these services are designed for business and can be expensive, but check out Scispace (Frame, Austen, Calleja, Dove, White, & Wilson, 2009) and the BSCW Shared Workspace System for free collaborative workspaces designed for research teams.
9. **To collect and combine information relevant to the community's interests.** Other Web 2.0 tools provide easy ways to aggregate relevant information from multiple sites and make it available in one place. Syndication services such as RSS feeds aggregate news feeds from multiple sites. These can be used to monitor for site updates based on user-determined criteria, and even can push notifications of site changes or content

headlines onto a home page. Mashups are applications that take two or more external sources to create a new service, allowing users to aggregate and layer information from different sources in new ways. For example, a mapping mashup can allow a group to combine photos, locations and street maps to look at patterns of graffiti in their community. [ProgrammableWeb](#) offers a gallery of mashups of various kinds. As another example, Workman and Stoddart (2007) report on an ambitious project whose goal was to create an online database to connect individuals throughout Utah with health services in their community.

10. To process and sort through information relevant to the group's interests. Many services allow users to work together to process, categorize and filter the vast amount of information that is available on the web, through the use of popularity ratings, annotated bookmarks, or keyword tags. People using these services contribute to cataloging, annotating, rating, and recommending content using simple, user-friendly buttons and links. The resulting information is compiled and made visible to all users, allowing them to be more efficient in locating resources that meet their criteria. Individuals can participate in widely available sites, or they can form online groups to share more specialized information. Popular examples include social bookmarking sites such as De.li.cious and personalized recommendation engines such as Digg and StumbleUpon. Sites oriented towards research teams, such as Zotero, Medeley and CiteULike, combine features of citation management services with social networking possibilities. Most of these are free, though some member-based rating sites are popping up.

Together, these ten uses for Web 2.0 tools suggest a wide range of ways to engage community members, facilitate relationship-building, promote participation, and build community. They also open up fascinating possibilities for collaborative information management and knowledge creation (Murugesan, 2007, Neylon, 2009, O'Reilly, & Battelle, 2009; Patil & Seigel, 2009).

Some words to the wise

Despite the tremendous possibilities offered by these new technologies, there are limitations to be considered. Keep accessibility, relevance, budget, privacy, and power/authority roles in mind during your development process.

To use social media and Web 2.0, your target audience has to be connected to and comfortable using the web. Don't take it for granted that community members are online; check. Using the Internet requires a relatively high level of literacy and computer skills, as well as the appropriate computer equipment and Internet connections. It is also worth noting that many of the sites and services mentioned here are only available in English and have a strong North American slant. Exceptions can more often be found for open source applications, which are tend to have diverse user communities willing to work on translating interfaces into multiple languages. In addition, most of these sites are not disability-accommodating. As of now it is up to users to buy or furnish their own accessory software to make the Internet accessible.

Fees may be another factor that makes these tools less accessible. The more storage space, users, integration and functionality, the more likely there are to be fees. Youtube, Flickr and many online information-sharing sites are free or have tiered membership for more storage space or quicker service.

Choosing a forum or platform on which to base your community's exchanges can be problematic. No platforms have all features, and users might be familiar with or typically use different platforms. For example, the AddThis function used here on the GJCPP web site includes 126 options for services that track and share Internet content. Experienced Internet users are already familiar with services that they prefer, and may be unwilling to follow yet another outlet. Certain services are moving towards cross-platform integration, at least with well-known resources such as YouTube, Facebook, de.li.cious, and Twitter. However, cross-platform transferability of data is not always guaranteed, and managing that integration even when it is available may require a certain level of sophistication among users.

Dilemmas can also arise regarding how to manage access to your group's information online. On one hand, closed forums can stifle participation and access. On the other hand, once information is available publicly, the group loses control over how that information is used. Issues about confidentiality and fair use can arise quickly. Think about issues such as member privacy, distribution and fair use of information about the group or its members, and intellectual property rights for contributions. Be aware that copying without fair referencing and credit

is fairly common practice; you may find content from your group's web site word for word on another site, without any credit or citation given.

Another element to consider is how to handle inappropriate use. Sites should be monitored for spamming, rude language, and inappropriate posts, which usually can be quickly removed. Users can also contribute to signaling posts that they find offensive. It can be more difficult to know how to handle more ambiguous behavior. People who are often off-topic, who discuss extremely sensitive personal information, or who provoke disagreements can make the forum unpleasant for other users, who will quickly learn to avoid the site. To some degree online communities can be self-correcting, as users monitor and provide feedback to other users (some of which itself may be inappropriate). Guidelines for appropriate behavior can be adopted from other online sources. Monitoring and maintenance can be undertaken by a webmaster.

On a more general note, criticisms are often raised that the Internet may be contributing to the

fragmentation and compartmentalization of society, both by replacing face-to-face contacts with virtual interaction, and by creating self-reinforcing, insular communities with members who choose to only be exposed to information and opinions that reflect similar points of view (Tefft, 2010). We hope that the types of efforts described here can contribute to countering these possibilities by facilitating positive community-building efforts and the open and free exchange of ideas.

Share your ideas!

How do you use social media and other online tools in your work? What are your thoughts about building community in the virtual world? We want to know! Please leave a comment below about your favorite sites and services and how you use them. Concrete example and links to specific resources are always welcome. Don't forget to include a website addresses or searchable name, and mention if a resource requires user fees or if it is freely available. And thanks for contributing to the GJCPP online community!

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