

Our heads in a tag cloud?



Henry Liebling and Genna West discuss how advances in technology can enhance our teaching and learning about sustainability.

Over the last 30 years it seems that all human knowledge has been sucked through a microchip. We can now instantly access information which would have been almost impossible to retrieve before the so-called digital age.

But what are the pros and cons of this digital revolution? Is progress necessarily good, or beneficial for the planet as a whole? Is more really better, or should we be content with less and slow down?

The technological landscape changes very quickly, and most technologies have a limited lifetime. Each time two technologies merge, such as camera and phone, they become more than the sum of their parts and people find new ways of using them. The same effect occurs

when two or more pieces of software converge or 'mashup': just look at the current proliferation of Web 2.0 applications (web applications that facilitate interactive information sharing). The image on the next page shows the ever-evolving sphere of applications and tools that work with Twitter: just one of the many social networking sites. With the number of Apple iPhone applications now moving towards 100,000, will we, or have we already, ended up with just one little handheld box that does almost everything? And looking back at vinyl LPs, walkmans and various video technologies, which lasted only for a decade or two, how long will it be before today's current technologies are replaced?

What does this mean for education for sustainability?

To some extent, advances in technology have contributed to the lack of sustainability that we face today. But this should be a motivation to ensure that we make use of current technologies to promote a more sustainable and environmentally responsible future. We can utilise advances in technology to educate about ancient wisdoms, existing sustainable lifestyles and share solutions in order to envision a sustainable future.

Dennis Meadows (2004) believes that any successful system is one that can change readily with "information [as] the key to transformation".



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Gazing into the Twitterverse¹. Developed by Jess3 and Brian Solis.

New ways of communicating and sharing information

We believe that interactivity is key to education for sustainable development. Here is how the ESCalate ESD website is trying to encourage the move from delivery to interactivity:

■ Social bookmarking

The website uses the social bookmarking website Diigo² as an interactive way to bookmark key websites. Diigo is open to everyone and allows users not only to bookmark and tag webpages, but also to highlight parts of the

webpage and attach virtual sticky notes. These annotations can either be kept private or shared within a Diigo group. We also share and comment on our bookmarks in the Diigo group 'Sustainable Education'³.

■ Tags

Tags are one or two-word descriptors that can be assigned to web bookmarks to remember key websites. They are similar to key words, but with more freedom, as tag-words can be chosen by the user. More than one tag can be used, which gives more flexibility than fixed categories or folders.

■ Tag lists

Lists of tags can be used by an individual, group or even across the whole of a social bookmarking site to help to classify and allow simple searching. There are pros and cons for both controlled tag lists using a predetermined restricted vocabulary, and free tagging which includes the tags everyone wants to use, sometimes called *folksonomy*⁴. Restricted tags can limit what you wish to classify, and free tags can leave you with thousands of tags with little overlap and much confusion. ►

¹ Jess3 and Brian Solis (2009) Gazing into the Twitterverse [online] Available: www.briansolis.com/2009/05/gazing-into-twitterverse/ [19/01/2010]

² www.diigo.com

³ <http://groups.diigo.com/group/sustainable-education>

⁴ The spontaneous cooperation of a group of people to organise information into categories.

