

For some educators, tagging is 'it'

New way to find and store information online has implications for schools

From eSchool News staff and wire service reports

A new way of searching the web that has emerged in the last year or so makes it easier than ever to find, store, and share information online. Supporters of the method, known as "tagging," say it could have broad implications for educators looking to direct students quickly and easily to more relevant information on the internet.

February 20, 2006—A new method of searching the internet aims to transform the way people look for and store the information they find online--and already it's having a significant impact on teaching and learning in some schools.

The method, dubbed "tagging," addresses a common complaint of many internet users that searching for information often is clumsy and inefficient. Web surfers often must sift through multiple pages of search results to find what they are looking for. And retrieving the best sites a second time usually means redoing the search or trolling through an unorganized list of sites that you have haphazardly saved in a "favorites" folder.

Tagging, however, can cut through the online clutter to deliver more relevant bits of information. That's because many versions allow users to search only those sites that other people already have deemed useful. It also makes it easier to find desired information again.

Supporters of the trend say the process could have broad implications for educators looking to direct students quickly and easily to more relevant educational content online.

"With the challenges presented to teachers in creating previewed lists of sites containing authentic information, a tagging tool is one more option for teachers to consider as they distribute site lists to students," said Jim Hirsch, assistant superintendent for technology at the Plano Independent School District in Texas.

Tagging services have multiple uses. First, they allow web surfers to save hundreds (or even thousands) of favorite web pages under key words. The technology is named after the keyword "tags" that users associate with each page they want to save. (For example, a web page featuring information about Abraham Lincoln could be saved under the tag, "Lincoln.") For individual users, tagging makes their own favorite pages easy to search and retrieve. Unlike storing addresses in a "favorites" folder on your computer, tagged pages are stored on the web and are accessible from any computer. A tagging site also lets you search among all your stored pages by keyword, eliminating the need to scroll through dozens of sites and remember the order in which your links are saved.

Educators say the greatest benefit of tagging, and the reason many large internet companies now are adopting it, is that tagging sites often allow users to make their list of tags and sites available to (and searchable by) either a closed community of individuals--

such as friends and family, or the students of Mrs. Jones's eighth-grade English class--or all other web surfers. So, instead of searching the entire web, users can limit their forays to an edited universe of pages others already have tagged as interesting or helpful. Also, many tagging services include the kind of social-networking features that have made sites such as MySpace.com and Friendster so popular: Users can post comments or vote on the usefulness of sites that others have tagged.

While tech-heads have been using the method for the past year or so, tagging is now moving into the mainstream. Silicon Valley heavyweights, along with a number of new upstarts, are now putting major resources into developing tagging services.

In December, Yahoo Inc. bought the popular tagging site Del.icio.us (pronounced "delicious"). Now, the Sunnyvale, Calif., company says it plans to allow Del.icio.us users to access their tagged links through My Web 2.0, Yahoo's own tagging site.

One new site, Shadows.com, allows individuals to save their favorite web sites under keywords that others also can search. The site, launched last October by the co-founders of Pluck Corp., based in Austin, Texas, attracts more than 275,000 unique monthly visitors, according to comScore Networks.

Yahoo's Flickr.com, which allows anyone to upload photos from their camera phone or computer to the web and then store them in a digital album that others can search by keyword tags, is another early tagging success.

There are two main ways to tag a web site. Del.icio.us, for instance, will ask you to enter the web address of the site you want to save into a field on its page and to click "save." But Del.icio.us, along with many others, also allows you download a toolbar to your desktop. While web surfing, you can add pages to your account simply by clicking on the toolbar.

Tagging could have significant implications for educators, both as a time-saving strategy and a way to find and share relevant information with students more easily.

"Let's say you wanted the students in your geometry class to take pictures of things in their community that illustrate different concepts, like 'acute angle' or 'hemisphere,' and there isn't any simple way for you to upload and organize these [photos] on a server hosted by your school," said Tom Hoffman, a former teacher and technology coordinator who now manages an open-source software project called SchoolTool. "You could have the students create free accounts on Flickr and upload their photos to the Flickr server. They could then tag the photos with the name of the concept they illustrate, and you could view them by going to Flickr and searching for 'hemisphere.'"

Hoffman added, "Of course, for some of these, other people will have already used the tag, especially for 'circle,' for example. To avoid this problem, you might have the students add a prefix to the tag, like 'mrh-circle,' so that only the class's photos will show up with those tags."

Tim Wilson, technology integration specialist for the Hopkins Independent School District #270 in Hopkins, Minn., said he would be giving a class on tagging to a group of teachers in his district soon. "I can think of several useful ways that tagging could be used by teachers," said Wilson, who, like Hoffman, contributes a blog on education technology to the Ed-Tech Insiders page at eSchool News Online.

For instance, "teachers can use Del.icio.us to get information to their students on particular topics," Wilson said. "Let's say a teacher has geography and government classes. He could tag web sites and online articles related to his curriculum (e.g., 'geography' and 'government'), and his students could subscribe to RSS feeds of those tags. Then the students could get notified about the articles automatically."

Another example: "I use Creative Commons-licensed Flickr photos frequently for my presentations," he said. "Thanks to the tags that users assign to the photos, finding photos on particular subjects is pretty easy. I've shown Flickr to several teachers, and they're using the photos they find to supplement their lectures and other presentations."

While tagging is still new and the method does have limitations, analysts are predicting further growth in the "tagosphere" as new companies crop up to grab a share of the nearly \$15 billion online-advertising market. Tagging sites are free to use, but some run advertisements that display small snippets of ad text targeted to the terms a user is searching for or other words on the page.

Tagging sites are increasingly transitioning beyond places individuals go to for retrieving their favorite web pages to sites they visit first when they want to search the internet. That means they are beginning to compete directly with search behemoths such as Google and Yahoo. A Google Inc. spokesman says the company doesn't comment on its competition. But "these systems are really coming into the mass market," said Caterina Fake, director of Yahoo Search technology.

Demand for the new sites reflects many web surfers' frustration with current search technology. The major search engines are all built around different algorithms that try to determine the most relevant sites for a particular search. But only 17 percent of internet users say they always find what they are looking for when they use a search engine, according to a 2005 report from the Pew Internet & American Life Project. In November, Americans conducted more than 5 billion online searches, up 9 percent from the previous year, according to comScore Networks.

There are some downsides to the new sites. Unlike a typical search engine, the effectiveness of tagging services depends on the quality and quantity of the people who save pages to them.

Also, users generally have to use the same tags for a search to capture all relevant pages. (For example, if you search for sites under the tag "Lincoln," you could miss out on applicable pages that were tagged under "Civil War.")

Links:

Del.icio.us

<http://del.icio.us>

Furl

<http://www.furl.net>

Flickr

<http://www.flickr.com>

Ed-Tech Insiders at eSN Online

<http://www.eschoolnews.com/eti/index.php>