

## **The Sky is Falling: Are We Nearing the End of Web 2.0?**

*\* \* \* On the Internet \* \* \**

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### **Abstract**

This article is a sequel to one written a decade ago by the same author on the loss of Ning as a free sandbox for educators to play in while experimenting with that particular tool. Ning had been designed to help anyone seeking to coalesce around a community online to leverage what they were learning about social networking while affording them the freedom to use such tools to create their own spaces on an open Internet in the new era of Web 2.0. But the developers of Ning were unable to save it from its corporate exigencies with the result that many of the thriving communities that had been developing there under the aegis of the long tail (Anderson, 2004) were faced with a choice of paying for continued passage or walking the gangplank.

This has happened at varying degrees of scale ever since then, as when Wikispaces set its users adrift in 2018, but only in the past year have educators experienced the demise of such a large number of major supporters of free online communities, including in particular the rapid demise of Google+ Communities and Yahoo! Groups. This article discusses the ramifications and where this trend is headed.

It's been almost ten years since I wrote *The Ning Thing* (Stevens, 2010) and published it in the *On the Internet* column in *TESL-EJ*. That article almost didn't make that issue. I was quite busy at that time, isn't everyone, and missed the deadline. I think the issue had already gone to the digital equivalent of "press" without my article, but I happened to be sitting in a pub conducting research into the role of craft beer in publication and professional development, in Amherst where the CALICO conference was being held that year, in the company of one of the editors of *TESL-EJ* who happened to be also in attendance, and I was able to explain to him the importance of my contribution to the field. After about the third beer he came around to my assessment and agreed to make the extra effort to tweak enough bytes to put the article through to the digital issue which was just then on the verge of being announced as being available, for free, to the world at large.

*TESL-EJ* has been freely accessible ever since it started publication in 1994, and the mission of the journal and all who make it happen four times a year is to keep this exchange and conduit of knowledge open to educators on a permanent basis, (in so far as permanence is a condition we can define and count on in Internet terms). We have, however, been often reminded of the precarious footing on which we rest when entities where we host our data suddenly cease to exist.

The case of Ning was an interesting precursor to what we see happening with Web 2.0 these days, to the detriment of communities of practice and their impacts on the flow of knowledge among educators. By the turn of the century Marc Andreessen had transformed the Mosaic browser, which he co-authored, into what we now know as Netscape, and in 2005 he co-founded Ning with Gina Bianchini. Ning was “an online platform for people and organizations to create custom social networks ... By June 2011 there were over 90,000 social websites running on the Ning Platform” (Wikipedia contributors, November 1, 2019). As with Netscape, Ning at the time provided an essential tool for the spread of knowledge throughout the Internet on the same principles on which the Internet itself was born: open and neutral, and free as in liberty, and also in beer.

Originally funded by its co-founders and “angel investors” Ning eventually turned to less angelic investors for capital and in 2010, the company’s new CEO announced the cancellation of its free services.

Educators rely on access to such spaces not only for forming courses and professional collaborations, but for sustaining viable communities of practice that lead to exponential growth of knowledge and relationships in their fields. The almost arbitrary withdrawal of these platforms, on short notice and with only token regard for the ability of their members to recoup elsewhere, has rendered into space-dust the work of thousands if not millions of educators who had been building networks and knowledge bases in freely accessible spaces online, and has broken the promise and compromised the potential of the much-touted Web 2.0.

Is this a trend we can expect to see more of in the years to come? There is so much of critical importance to educators in the tools I am using even now to document this and to store it in spaces where you can find it and access it online. The prospect of any of these tools being suddenly withdrawn is of serious concern to all who use them, having stored our lives and careers on servers throughout cyberspace over which we have no control (Notopoulos, 2019). This article looks at what has been happening in this regard over the past decade, and where this leaves us going forward.

## **What happens when online communities of practice are arbitrarily displaced?**

By 2010 many communities of educators were among the 90,000 who had found Ning to be the best social networking platform to date, in any price range, to enable them to reach and interact with like-minded colleagues in ways that encouraged and nourished the development of their robust communities of practice. But when these educators were suddenly informed that their portals would disappear along with all their data if they didn’t pay costs beyond the means of many educators to sustain (sometimes, hundreds of dollars a year), they were faced with a conundrum that unfortunately has proved to be a harbinger of things to come.

A distributed community of practice is dependent on many fragile factors, and a major one of these is where it lives and breathes online. If the online space is user-friendly, intuitive, and offers the

right features for facilitating community sharing and development, then interaction among members leads to the implementation of collaborative projects that define the cohesion of the community, forwarding its goals. This is no more clearly seen than when the platform on which a CoP rests its development is suddenly removed.

Several things might happen in this case. The community first struggles to recover its data, hopefully to remount it online elsewhere. If this is successful then the community might regroup, but it is often the case that the community can only mount the vestiges of its data online as in a museum, but without the life that the lost platform afforded. Often third parties will try to help with data import, sometimes for free and sometimes not.

In my experience, no community that I have founded or experienced as a member has ever recovered fully intact from such a blow to its foundations. Although members of affected communities might regroup elsewhere or happen to reunite as latecomers to other existing communities, there never seems to be a way to recover the original community dynamics and spirit.

### **Options for salvage of data**

In the case of Ning a decade ago, where 90,000 communities were told they would be thrown overboard unless they paid passage on the mother ship that was restructuring under capitalist rather than altruistic precepts, educators were particularly impacted. Pearson (formerly Longman) tried to help ELT educators preserve their actual communities after the loss of Ning by subsidizing them at the most basic level offered by Ning's restructured paid platform. Unfortunately this level only supported 150 community members and thus left community owners in the position of having to decide whom to exclude from the community once that number was reached, in order to let in new members. This was neither a reasonable nor workable solution, as it forced CoP managers to jettison old growth in order to welcome new seedlings, so a forest ecosystem could not possibly develop to sustain and nurture the resulting CoP (see Stevens, 2011).

**Grouply.** One option for salvage of Ning data was Grouply, a Web 2.0 service founded in 2006 (see <https://www.crunchbase.com/organization/grouply#section-overview>) with intent to compete with Yahoo! Groups and Ning by creating an email and documents management portal with features more similar to Facebook than those afforded by those other two services (Contributor, 2008). By 2008, Grouply claimed to have “blown past” Ning by capturing a larger share of the available web territory, but by working “symbiotically” (or “parasitically”) with (or, on) Yahoo! Groups to add a Facebook look to their group interactions (Anon, 2008).

After Ning announced in April 2010 that the company would no longer host free Nings, Grouply rallied lifeboats to rescue CoPs having to jump off the Ning ship (Rao, 2010, April 16). Grouply made it possible to port the entire community over to the Grouply format, membership intact, although it would now operate more like a Yahoo! Group than as a portal with homepage and other features that had been built into Nings. But the CoPs were just settling into their new surroundings when Grouply was acquired by Oodle, a company whose business was to game social networks and aggregate their content elsewhere (Updated, 2010).

Grouply had a track record to make it appear to be a viable option to Ning or Yahoo! Groups, and therefore many CoP moderators ported their Nings to Grouply, whereas others had decided to forsake Yahoo! Groups for the more pleasing interface at Grouply, but the parasitic nature of the

service was perhaps aggravated by its acquisition by Oodle, which, according to Wikipedia contributors (2019, December 14), is

*currently the largest classifieds aggregator [of] listings from sites like eBay, ForRent.com, BoatTrader.com, as well as local listings from local newspapers and websites. Oodle strongly encourages posters to include a Facebook profile with listings, believing that users will prefer the transparency of dealing with someone with a name and face attributed to their listing ... On March 6, 2009, Facebook launched a now defunct version of its Marketplace application powered by Oodle. In November 2010 Oodle acquired Grouply, a platform for building custom social networking groups. The QVC home shopping company purchased Oodle in 2012. In May 2015, the site was purchased from QVC by Oodle Holdings.*

Grouply turned out to be a poor choice for migration from Ning, and within a few years communities so migrated simply disappeared offline.

**Posterous, then WordPress, to the rescue.** Another player at the height of its popularity in 2010 was Posterous, which offered to help Ning users port over their data to Posterous blogs, (Rao, 2010, June 23). Posterous had many affordances of particular interest to education, for example, it allowed users to create blog posts by email, so that teachers could work with students who could post and comment on each other's posts as seamlessly as replying to an email. And it gave users the ability to use the URL of an image in a blog post and have the image appear automatically in the post (short-cutting what would have otherwise been a many-step process), so it was an excellent site for quickly creating instructional materials with images captured in Jing, which allowed users to post their captures immediately to Screencast.com, where they acquired a URL which was copied instantly to the computer's buffer, and from which it could be embedded in a blog post on Posterous directly from the computer's memory buffer (not having to invoke an embed code, but just by pasting the image URL into the post). This was one of the most seamless combinations of free Web 2.0 tools for creating tutorials directly on a blog post that I have ever encountered.

But whereas Ning was a user-interactive LMS (learning management system) Posterous was a CMS (a content management site). It managed to capture posts from Ning users and mount them in an attractive format. But then in 2013 Posterous was acquired by Twitter which proceeded to kill off the service. In this case educators did not have the problem of loss of community, since Posterous was a blogging tool, not a substrate for community Interaction, but there remained the issue of loss of data, which for many had been recently recovered from Ning. Fortunately WordPress came to the rescue and allowed Posterous users to create WordPress blogs for free to act as receptacles for data recovered from Posterous (Jeffries, 2013).

In this way many educational portals in Ning were captured in static format to Posterous blogs and then preserved in WordPress, where they remain online to this day, but not as dynamic communities, only as likenesses of their former selves now displayed as in a static gallery.

## **EVO: A canary in the coal mine**

EVO (Electronic Village Online) started in 2001 as a CALL-IS (in TESOL) clearinghouse site for language teachers and other educators and practitioners in educational technology to mount 5-week courses and deliver them for free to peers who wanted to learn new skills. As EVO has transcended the era we have just been discussing, it can serve as an indicator of where communities go to

organize online for free. At the EVO website at PBworks (<http://evosessions.org>), there are data from 2001 to the present showing where the moderators of each session chose to base both their content and their interactive presence. PBworks could be another space that, in light of what has recently happened, might now be regarded as precarious, but these EVO data still all reside here: <http://evosessions.pbworks.com/w/page/10708564/EVO%20Previous%20Sessions>.

### **EVO moderator choice of interactive spaces for their sessions**

EVO moderators are practitioners in various aspects of English language teaching and learning who, each year since 2001, have created mini-courses lasting several weeks, referred to as sessions, whose purpose is to convey their expertise at a distance to others in the field. These moderators have individually or in collaboration accepted the challenge over the past two decades of having to create from scratch and with whatever resources they themselves can muster, a five-week session that will attract colleagues to it and will mount online a learning environment that will cover two main ends:

1. place online an easily accessible and hyperlinked cohesive plan of action designed to convey or help participants explore an issue or expertise of consequence to their work and practice and
2. implement a viable and effective means of communication among participants that will allow them to carry out, organize, and archive their conversations and related artifacts.

EVO started at the cusp of the Web 2.0 at a time when educators were eagerly exploring and adapting the free and open online tools that designers of such tools were seemingly endlessly churning out for use by anybody, for free. Each year for the past two decades there have been 10 to 20 sessions created in these productive conditions, and what EVO moderators have chosen as their new portals when put in the position of having to frequently change platforms can give us insights into how the changing nature of Web 2.0 sites is impacting what is possible for others who would like to create educational materials, without funding, for online environments.

I am undertaking a study of what course and learning management tools EVO moderators have been using since the sudden loss of Ning ten years ago, and how recent changes to the EVO playing field are impacting the sustainability of reliance on free Web 2.0 tools over time. In this article, I want to focus on two salient recent developments, the sudden loss this past year of Google+ Communities, and of Yahoo! Groups.

#### **Long standing reliance in EVO on Yahoo! Groups.**

Ten years ago, in 2010, EVO sessions were predominantly based in Yahoo! Groups. In 2010 there were 12 sessions, all but three of which used Yahoo! Groups for participant interaction. The remaining three sessions used Ning as their LMS portal.

In 2011, out of 11 EVO sessions that year, 6 again used Yahoo! Groups, 2 used Grouply, and two used Moodle. Only one still used a Ning (which was no longer free, but was being perpetuated by the grant from Pearson at the time).

By 2012, EVO moderators had ended their infatuation with Grouply, but eight of the 14 sessions were still in Yahoo! Groups. One session was using Wikispaces as its syllabus portal, a web host

also destined for collapse in the coming years. By 2013, when there were only 10 EVO sessions running that year, just 4 were listing Yahoo! Groups as their portals.

Meanwhile, in December 2012, Google had announced its launch of Google+ Communities (Lytle, 2013). At this time, EVO 2013 sessions had already been planned and were about to launch in January, but what we learned about Google+ Communities over the course of the following year led to yet another tectonic shift in EVO moderator perceptions of how best to mount and coalesce their online communities of practice.

### **The Rise in EVO of Google+ Communities.**

By the end of 2013 Google+ Communities appeared to have been the app of choice for organizing communities of educators around a dominant, or even single, portal. Toward that end, it had many alluring affordances. Each post was usually built around a graphic of some kind. The posts were displayed in tiles format so the appearance was colorful and inviting. The interaction was similar to Facebook in that discussions took place on each post. Community members could create events and there was initially integration of these events with Google Hangout. Each post had its own URL visible to anyone or only to community members depending on credentials set by group moderators.

Educators warmed up in droves to Google+ Communities. It's not as if EVO moderators weren't aware of their options, but the price was right, and the look and feel was comfortable for those who entrusted their sessions to Google+ Communities and remained and thrived in those spaces for the six years between the launch of Google+ Communities and its sudden closure by Google in April 2019.

The problem seems to have been that Google+ Communities attracted only a small niche of Google users and was not in serious competition with Facebook (or Twitter) as had initially been hoped. For educators, Google+ Communities was in many ways preferable to Facebook because Facebook can span multiple aspects of a user's lifestyle whereas Google+ allowed users to create circles that would confine these aspects to separable silos with greater user control over keeping the silos from blending into one another, an important consideration in an educational context. But the bottom line was that it was not meeting Google's expectations, so in 2019 Google took the decision to cut bait, leaving a lot of educators once again floundering about looking for the most viable crucibles in which to collaboratively develop their visions and aspirations in CoPs of like-minded colleagues (see Denning, 2015, April 17 and Denning, 2015, April 23); and in the run-up to its final demise, Nardi (2019).

With the advent of Google+ Communities we saw a sharp change in choice of platform for the 17 EVO sessions offered in 2014. Of these 7 were still basing themselves in Yahoo! Groups, but 6 had gone over the new Google+ Communities platform for group interaction, augmented with some sort of content management tool (and this tended to be PBworks). By 2015, Google+ Communities seems to have gained ascendancy as the platform of choice for group interaction in EVO. Of the 13 sessions that year, none were any longer indicating they were based in Yahoo! Groups. Most were using PBworks for content, but 8 were using Google+ Communities as their interactive spaces. This trend continued in 2016. Of the 14 EVO sessions hosted that year, 10 were now based in Google+ Communities, often augmented with PBworks wikis.

In 2017, a new trend seems to have emerged. Of the 16 EVO sessions in 2017, the number basing themselves in Google+ Communities had gone down to 5, and was that year surpassed by the

number of sessions (6) using a Moodle. Meanwhile 3 sessions were using Schoology, a free site with similar functionality to Moodle, but hosted at Schoology (thus more easily implementable than Moodle which requires its own host server). There were two sessions using Facebook for participant interaction.

### **2018 and the demise of Wikispaces**

Toward the end of 2017, yet another venerable online wiki tool announced that it would be shutting down in 2018. Wikispaces had started out as a free wiki option in 2005 and had developed a robust community base among educators, but in 2014 it was acquired by Tes Global (formerly TSL Education). Later that year Tes revoked free hosting on all wikis that were not used in K–12 or higher education. They did however, according to Wikipedia contributors (2019, November 29), give away more than 100,000 premium wikis to K–12 educators, but this was only a temporary reprieve. In 2017 Wikispaces announced that for financial reasons, it would shut down its classroom and other free Wikispaces, which all would cease to exist in July, 2018. By early 2019 it had closed down even its premium wikis, and the site went permanently offline.

As always happens when community spaces wither and die, educators scrambled as best they could given the short (drop) deadlines to recover the data that mattered to them. EVO moderators had not been heavy users of Wikispaces in EVO, but they were among the many worldwide who were impacted.

Although Wikispaces was not of critical utility to EVO, it was the latest domino to fall in what was becoming a tendency of long-standing community spaces to suddenly shutter their doors and not always give sufficient time nor sufficient tools for community owners working on their own to retrieve their data.

This latest experience with loss of free online community space had to be at the back of moderators' minds when they started preparing in late 2017 for their 2018 session. The choices of platform were similar to what they had used in January and February 2017. Of the 14 EVO sessions, the number basing themselves in Google+ Communities remained at 5, the number of sessions using a Moodle remained at 6, and 3 sessions were again using Schoology. But once again, we were about to lose a critical tool that had underpinned some of our most successful efforts to date of building attractive and robust communities of practice.

### **Google pulls the rug out from under its Google+ Communities**

While preparing in late 2018 for EVO 2019, we learned that Google+ Communities would cease to function in April 2019. This was not going to impact our operations in January and February, 2019, but those who had already committed their ongoing communities to Google+ Communities were also aware that these would all disappear soon after that.

Nevertheless, three of the sessions that had already been using Google+ Communities for several years decided to continue their ongoing communities in the same spaces for the time being and deal with the upcoming calamity later. Two new sessions running for the first time that year decided to use Google+ Communities because it was an easy and compelling way to get going for a first-time session (and neither of these continued their EVO sessions in 2020). Two of the three who continued using Google+ Communities knowing they would soon lose their portals regrouped in 2020 in different community spaces, but the third that had been using Edmodo and Facebook as well simply continued in 2020 in those two spaces with little loss of stride.

So 5 of the 16 EVO sessions in 2019 used Google+ Communities, and another 6 were hosted in Moodle, while two of the other sessions used Schoology. But in another shift in moderator preferences, the three remaining sessions based themselves in Google Classroom (and one of these had in 2018 been in Google+ Communities). As had been the case ever since 2015, no session moderators chose to base their session in Yahoo! Groups.

### **Salvage operations with Google+ Communities**

As with Ning and Posterous in previous years, educators' first concern in reaction to the Google+ shutdown was to preserve their data which, as in previous years, could be downloaded from the provider in xml files which the user would then be able to reconstruct into web pages as long as they had the requisite skills for coding that reconstruction. As in previous years, so many people were finding themselves all at once in the unenviable position of having to download their data and then repost it, that third party providers were again offering ways of repackaging the raw data for import into their new community homes. But one difference in the case of Google+ Communities was that, in the past, the new homes were themselves white-hat blogging platforms seeking to capitalize on a windfall increase in user-base, which is why Posterous, and then WordPress provided tools for the extraction of the raw xml data from its previous locations and a means of import into new accounts on their platforms so seamlessly, and for free. And the result in both cases was a satisfactory, if not replication, at least preservation of content intact at the new location.

However at the time of the demise of Google+ Communities, there was no such port of convenience available to Google+ Communities users. One entity emerged, calling itself Google+ Exporter, to provide a set of tools, not free but at a cost of around \$20 US dollars, which caught the attention of a substantial number of owners of communities looking for something, anything, that would get their data off Google's servers in the short time allowed and package it in a way that would be importable into other blogging sites such as Blogger or WordPress. So for a period of time, those closely attuned to the process formed their own brief communities of convenience forced to focus on the ins and outs of working with this particular tool in time to get their data intact from Google. Google+ Community moderators might have been involved in many multiple communities, and might want to package the most important of these for import into their blog sites, preserving pictures and videos, and the names of Google+ Communities users associated with their posts. Just that last step, associating users with their own posts in the new location, required tweaks to code needed to import the xml into their blog of choice.

After the deadline had passed, when Google had deleted all Google+ Communities user data left on its servers, and we were able to see what had become of our salvage efforts, these were found wanting. Certainly the communities of practice based in these highly functional Google+ Communities spaces had disappeared or gone elsewhere. For peripheral members whose only contact with such communities was in the Google+ Communities space that had attracted them in the first place, these once-bustling communities had vanished without a trace.

### **Yahoo! Groups announces its closure**

Yahoo! Groups had been a long serving platform for EVO communities and a predominant one up through 2015. Yahoo! Groups had been in existence since the beginning of the 21st century and EVO coordinators had been using Yahoo! Groups spaces for archiving their documents and statistics for almost that entire time. For EVO sessions which wanted to make it possible for participants to communicate with the community in email, Yahoo! Groups was an excellent choice, and emails posted there would remain available, and searchable in a number of ways, in the decades

that followed. But EVO communities had most recently been turning to platforms more mobile friendly and which allowed for conversations to turn on embedded graphics. Yahoo! Groups had fallen out of favor as the platform of choice for EVO moderators, but many EVO sessions maintained extensive archives in Yahoo! Groups spaces.

EVO moderators learned during their annual moderator development sessions in October-November, 2019, while the moderators were preparing for the EVO 2020 season, that Yahoo! Groups had been acquired by Verizon and was planning to delete all user supplied data from all our Yahoo! Groups sites. Just like that.

If any 2020 EVO session moderators were planning to compensate for the complete demise of Google+ Communities by falling back on Yahoo! Groups as a community space, they did not leave an easily traceable record. Meanwhile much community attention was being consumed with coping, with only 8 weeks notice, to rescue the heavy investment of time and community that had been poured into our Yahoo! Groups communities in the first decades of the present century. Many of these groups mattered very much to us, and to countless others, whose long-nurtured communities were now threatened with sudden death, and burial in an unmarked grave if swift action wasn't taken.

There were the familiar ways of harvesting data directly from Yahoo in huge zip files, which had all the email traffic and Yahoo! Group files, but these preserved only text, no photo or community member data, two critical components that form the face and essence of a community. Fortunately there quickly appeared a rescue option in the form of Groups.io, which was an email management and community interaction site similar to Yahoo! Groups that had long been attracting imports of communities wholesale from both Yahoo! Groups and Google Groups by offering services more in keeping with the functionality of those groups; in the case of Yahoo, before its services had been gradually deprecated since the creation of Yahoo! Groups "Neo" in 2010 (see <http://yahoogroupedia.pbworks.com/w/page/68466246/Yahoo%20Groups%20Neo>).

The founder of Groups.io was Mark Fletcher, who in 1997 had created a free mailing list management site called ONElist which soon merged with EGroups, which was in turn acquired by Yahoo in 2000, where Mark Fletcher worked for a few years before striking out on his own in 2014 to form Groups.io.

When Yahoo! Groups was acquired by Verizon in 2019, group owners were given 56 days to retrieve their data (a deadline eventually extended by another 6 weeks) but the data extraction tool offered "only retrieves text; photos and other files still have to be downloaded individually" so the extension did not really apply to the hardest to get at data (Mak, 2019). Groups.io promised to handle import of all data from Yahoo! Groups and set it up as a fully functioning mirror community, intact with all photos, files, and user subscriptions preserved. As with all the groups that Fletcher had worked with over the years, hosting would be free, but in order to effect the move, the group that the data would be moved to needed to be upgraded to premium for one year at a cost of around \$100 (after that, it could be reverted to basic and hosted for free in perpetuity, however 'perpetuity' is defined in Web 2.0 terms these days).

When the scale of the demand for that service became apparent, Groups.io doubled the price of the premium upgrade, ostensibly to both quell demand and exploit the situation for whatever it was worth to whomever most needed to extract their data with their communities intact. Upgrade to

premium put that Yahoo! Group in a queue for processing. Processing took a long time, so there was also the option to jump to the head of the queue for another couple hundred dollars. Wikipedia contributors (2020) reported that in 2010 Yahoo was reporting that there were 10 million Yahoo! Groups, so with an assumed increase in that number over the next decade, one can only imagine the scale of the desperation for rescue.

## **Moving toward the end of Web 2.0 as we know it**

### **Online community portals chosen by EVO 2020 moderators**

Faced with the loss in recent years of so many other spaces that they had developed, worked in, and relied on, moderators preparing for EVO in 2020 were in uncertain territory. However, being for the most part skilled online practitioners, their choices of where to reform their communities, given the remaining available options, can be uniquely instructive for the rest of us.

There were 14 sessions planned for EVO 2020. Half these sessions, using Moodle, were not impacted by the current round of vagaries of the Web 2.0 marketplace and carried on unaffected. Regarding the other 7 sessions, 2 opted for Google Classroom, and one of the sessions using Google+ Communities in 2019 decided to replace it with Slack. A fourth session opted to use Schoology.

That left three sessions in 2020 that had been using Google+ Communities in 2019 and were forced to replace it. One of these went to the Canvas platform. One replaced Google+ Communities with Facebook and Groups.io (as well as meeting in Minecraft and in Discord); and the other one simply focused on Facebook and Edmodo, their remaining two community interaction spaces.

### **What else could we lose?**

EVO and others trying to mount online courses remain heavily invested in two Web 2.0 tools in particular, Google Drive and PBworks. I just now googled the future of Google Drive but was unable to come up with anything alarming, which is reassuring. I'm not so sure about PBworks. Their blog discusses only maintenance issues, and there is no clue to any changes afoot, but they not long ago cut their free wikis back to only one workspace per user, hardly adequate for the kind of freewheeling development we have been enjoying in EVO, where moderators were able to create a different wiki each year for each new idea they had for an EVO session, and archive the old session. New users can use the basic service at no cost but can't really develop a set of courses unless they keep them under a single project front page (or pay to upgrade). See Figure 1 for the current terms:

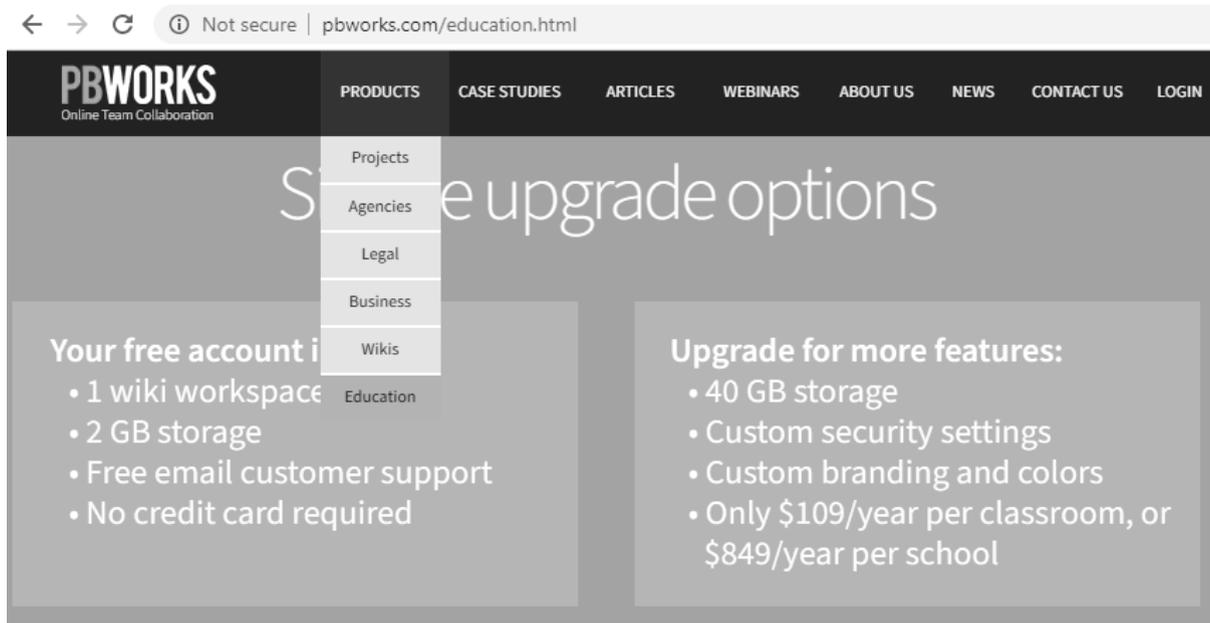


Figure 1. What you get for free with a basic educator’s PBworks account.

As we move inexorably from freemium to pay-me-um, in the past year, we have lost Doodle as a free tool for scheduling events and allowing potential participants to crowd-source their synchronous availability. The service has just gone over to paid plans starting at around \$5 a month.

And almost unnoticed, Today’s Meet disappeared as well this past year. Today’s Meet allowed users to create free chat rooms and give them mnemonic names that could be shared with groups ranging from office mates and family, to classrooms and auditoriums full of people — any setting that would benefit from a back channel. No login was required; anyone could join the room just by going to the URL and entering text. I used to find it especially useful when covering other people’s classes, and I needed to get students I had never met before quickly onto the URL for what I wanted them to do while I was with them. The teachers whose classes I was covering also appreciated being able to see what I had done with their class and catch up with their students responses through the Today’s Meet link. The simplicity, utility, and convenience will be missed by all who used it (but you can always Google for the inevitable alternatives, which are starting to proliferate as you read this).

Credly, an ecosystem for awarding digital badges, sent out an email to its users on December 21, 2019 to inform them that the free part of their freemium service would soon cease to function, and users would need to “upgrade to Credly’s Acclaim platform to continue issuing badges after June 30, 2020” at which point free subscriptions would “no longer be able to issue badges.” But people who have already earned badges have only a link to where their badge resides. At THAT link there is a link to the evidence of how that person earned the badge. However, once the badge is removed from where it is, there would be no way from existing pointers to the badge to find that underlying data.

Websites have often come and gone over the years, and we all need to be aware of what we are getting into when we use them. But the loss of some can have ramifications down the line, and

there appears to be disappointing integrity on the part of freemium hosts to assume responsibility for any ramifications.

## **Conclusion**

When I wrote about the “Ning thing” in 2010, it was from the perspective of having observed in Ning what appeared to be a one-off phenomenon, where a site designed to promote openness and equality for anyone in the long tail, enabling them to take advantage of the affordances of Web 2.0, had been established by developers operating largely for altruistic reasons just to see if their work could nurture communities of practice of educators and others bent on leveraging their values for the good of the community. But this had been abruptly torn asunder by corporate interests who had shown their users little consideration for the data, artifacts, and networks of human interactions that their work had produced. True, these users were using the spaces for free (assuming Ning had not been able to extract lucrative data points from them that would benefit them in their more covert business), but despite the obvious fact that the model was unsustainable for educators on low incomes and working for institutions who would not have supported the experiments that they had initiated when they had free access to the Ning space, the most shocking thing was that it had happened. Just like that.

Many educators work in online spaces to further their professional development or classroom goals. One great incentive is to learn all we can about such spaces, what a great variety of tools there are available, what their affordances are for our professional goals and aspirations, and how they integrate with our social networks and those of our students. But we are also learning that many of these spaces are like quicksand. There must be reasons for the changing dynamics, a general shift away from desktop to mobile apps among them. But in the past few years we have seen not necessarily an increase in the number of Web 2.0 sites going down — that happens all the time — but a sudden demise of sites hosting large numbers of CoPs of students and educators, resulting in significant data loss, despite token efforts of service providers to help users recover their data, and sometimes terminal disruption to these communities.

When we don't pay for the tools we use then we have no right to expect that their developers have any responsibility toward us, apart from the reputations that accrue to them when they properly protect and preserve the data we have entrusted with them. But even that is not our right, and we have to be prepared from the day that new corporate owners might want their server space back.

What happens when we lose PBworks and Google? Imagine having to pay up or download all your data from those spaces? Just like that!

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