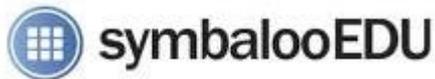


## A Review of “SymbalooEDU, the Personal Learning Environment Platform”

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### Introduction

Created in 2010, SymbalooEDU is an educational version of the original Symbaloo application founded in Holland in March 2007. It is a software application that enables learners to organize, integrate and share online content in one setting or Personal Learning Environment (PLE). The platform also allows educators to create mixes of tailored resources and share these mixes with students. Once the mixes (or webmixes) are shared, students can integrate them into their own SymbalooEDU PLE, where they are free to use, add and share content with their peers and tutors.

### What are PLEs?

Personal Learning Environments (PLEs) are becoming more widely used by educators who are responding to the e-learning needs of their students. They are, as Harmelen (2006) notes, “a relatively new phenomenon” and have emerged as “a response to current pedagogic approaches, which require that learner’s e-learning systems be under the control of the learners themselves.”

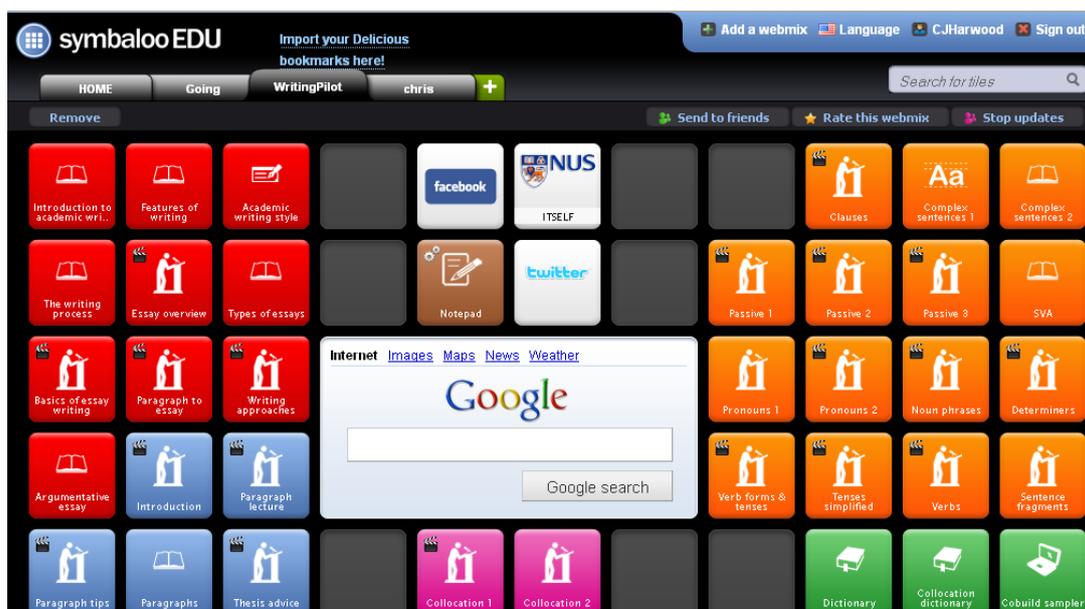
Downes (2005) uses the term “e-learning 2.0” to refer to the shift in web-based learning from read-only to read-write learning. He argues that the development of Web technology to allow written and video interaction has led to a social revolution. What has happened is that the Internet has shifted from a medium where information is transmitted and consumed into being a platform “in which content is created, shared, remixed, repurposed, and passed along.” Examples of these kinds of content creation, sharing and remixing services abound. *Blogger*, *Wikipedia*, *YouTube*, *Flickr* and *Facebook* are ubiquitous online websites providing just such services. SymbalooEDU is a tool that supports learners by making it easy

for them to access, organize and share these services. It also allows educators to encourage student-to-student interaction via social networking sites in an online setting.

### How does SymbalooEDU work?

SymbalooEDU works by enabling users to simply construct customizable tiles which are linked to URLs of online resources. Once the user has created a grid of tiles (or webmix), it can be shared with others via email.

The application has a grid layout, with color icons (called tiles) within each space. The user can organize the tiles how they like and a search box at the top of the grid allows users to quickly search for specific resources or add them to their SymbalooEDU webmix. (See the [user guide](#) for more details.)



### What makes SymbalooEDU different from other bookmark resources?

The appeal of SymbalooEDU is that it is visually very attractive and simple for **customizing**, **organizing** and **sharing** information. It is also very easy to use, even for those with minimal IT knowledge, in order to create an effective compilation of resources mixed in a way they believe is most useful. This allows educators and learners to co-construct PLEs, which should provide support for learners to set their own learning goals, manage their learning, manage both content and process, and communicate with others in the process of learning.

Uniquely, SymbalooEDU allows users to add resources or links to projects quickly through its update function. When updates are made to a user's webmix, they will automatically appear on the webmixes that the user has shared with others, whether fellow students or professional peers. Furthermore, SymbalooEDU hosts a gallery of user-generated content that is indexed in Google. Using Google, for example, one can enter the search terms 'symbaloo + English' writing and be able to access various English writing webmixes that other users have shared with 'the world.' The platform also allows users to link to PDFs, Word documents and slide presentations. One can simply place documents of this kind in Google docs and use the [URL](#) from Google Docs to make their own webmix tile.

The ability to organize, customize and update mixes of websites and share and use other people's tiles is a great way to find new resources. It is these key functions that distinguish SymbalooEDU from other bookmarking browsers such as [Reddit](#), [del.icio.us](#) and [Posterbee](#), which do similar things in a less organized and less visual way.

For educators, SymbalooEDU is a useful place to organize resources and showcase student work by sharing their SymbalooEDU pages with their peers. (Examples of work portfolios can be seen [here](#).) For English language educators, it has numerous uses from providing learners with mixes of essential resources such as dictionaries, online concordance software and APA referencing guides to specific skills and grammar mixes using links to YouTube video tutorials and grammar practice websites. The platform also enables learners to construct their own mixes of web content and share these mixes with their peers. For example, students could construct a portfolio of information and resources on whatever topic the class is working on and then share this information. They could also provide summaries, notes, reviews and even reports on the topics and link this text to the webmix using Google docs. Alternatively, they could provide a link to a slide or video presentation about a topic using [slideshare](#) or [vimeo](#). The different ways students are able to produce, construct and present work on SymbalooEDU are limited only by an educator's imagination. (An academic writing webmix can be viewed [here](#).)

Other learning management systems or virtual learning environments such as [Moodle](#) and [Blackboard](#) are designed to help teachers by facilitating the administration and management of educational courses for their students. Learning is tightly controlled by the

teacher or lecturer. These systems are also notoriously slow in allowing the integration of new technology and software.

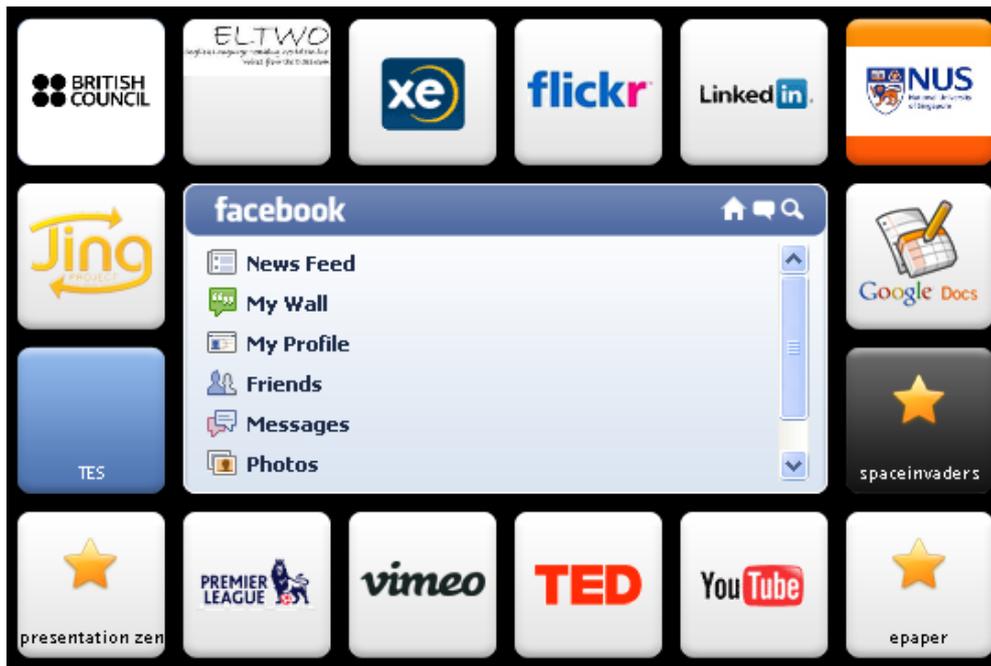
Rather than placing controls on what and how users learn, PLEs such as SymbalooEDU give them control over the product as well as the process. Students are able to receive support and guidance from tutors but also are empowered to set their own learning objectives, manage both the content and process of their learning, and communicate with one another in that process so as to more effectively achieve their goals.

This learning paradigm shift reflects the changing ways in which people are using technologies to communicate and to learn and the accompanying social effect of such use (Attwell, 2007). The people at SymbalooEDU understand this paradigm shift and have set up a [Teacher Forum](#) and a [blog](#) and they have made available a number of [training videos](#) to enable educators to learn about the application and fully exploit it in different learning contexts.

### **Social Learning**

In order to fully reap the benefits of a PLE such as SymbalooEDU, learners should be encouraged to communicate and share information, ideas, knowledge and resources using social media. Educators should embed social learning opportunities into courses to facilitate peer learning and allow the PLE to evolve with the learners' needs and use. For example, blogs and class Facebook pages can be used to help students develop reflective practice or constructive feedback skills and provide them with opportunities for informal peer learning. These social networking points sit alongside other course related resources on SymbalooEDU as well as whatever other bookmarks the user chooses.

To facilitate this social learning, SymbalooEDU has recently added new social widgets (Twitter, Facebook and YouTube) to its tile database. These new widgets allow users to browse, update and post to these social sites but also see what their friends are doing directly from the large central tile in SymbalooEDU.



Although SymbalooEDU is more a visual bookmarking service than a start page, the fact that it quickly links users to where they want to go is really useful, and they can set it as their homepage in whatever browser they are working in. This can lead to users integrating the platform into their daily digital lives, creating an online environment where learning resources are seamlessly merged with other aspects of the user's digital life.

### Any Criticism?

The main criticism I have found with SymbalooEDU is that the user has to stop updates of shared webmixes in order to begin customizing them. If SymbalooEDU could allow users to reactivate the updating function once they have customized or added to a shared webmix, this would reduce the amount of copying/moving of tiles they need in order to reconstruct mixes of resources.

When using the platform on PCs, laptops, and iPads/tablets, SymbalooEDU works very well indeed. However, on smaller devices such as smart phones, the tiles become very small and it is difficult to use, particularly for adults who have larger fingers. This is a barrier to ubiquitous mobile use of SymbalooEDU in small touch-screen environments.

SymbalooEDU is also only currently available in five languages: English, Dutch, French, German and Portuguese. One could argue that this makes the platform eurocentric. While this

may or may not be true, it is not a problem for EFL/EAP teachers and learners as the whole point of using it is to facilitate English language learning.

### **Try it and see for yourself**

The benefits of SymbalooEDU far outweigh these minor weaknesses. It is an easy to master tool that has many uses. Users can organize bookmarks visually, which makes it simple and effective for creating an appropriate compilation of resources organized the way that anyone, whether educator or learner, feels is most helpful. It is also very convenient and allows users to add links or resources to projects efficiently. The versatility and simplicity of the platform enables learners and educators to utilize it in almost any learning context.

A quick and easy (free) registration process that involves you simply providing an email address and password will give you instant access to [SymbalooEDU](http://www.symbalooedu.com).

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### **About the Author**

Chris Harwood has taught EFL and EAP for over 15 years in Japan, Thailand, Austria, England, Egypt and now in Singapore. His research interests include learner autonomy, collaborative learning and CALL. He is currently researching how to integrate e-learning platforms into university English language departments. Chris lectures in Business Communication at the National University of Singapore.