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Walking the technology talk: The tools that enhance collaborative work

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Walking The Technology Talk: The Tools That Enhance Collaborative Work

By **Dr Shelley Kinash and Diana Knight**

Current research yields numerous compelling accounts of how educational technology enhances teaching and learning. Yet if educators truly believe that technology can help learners, they should also be asking whether it can enhance their own work. Two academic developers and two IT(information technology) teaching academics recently embarked on a collaborative research paper that ended up highlighting this – the irony being that they had been ignoring the very digital methodologies that they had been exhorting their students to use.

The Dawn Of A Digital Understanding

The first lesson was learned after ordering traditional, hard-copy books for their background research. In trying to determine a schedule that allowed each of the four authors a substantive turn with the key books, and a mutually convenient location where they would be shelved when not in circulation, it became evident that busy and conflicting schedules made this ideal scenario impossible.

During attempts to work out a solution, one of the authors asked why traditional printed texts were needed in the first place. Whilst well-acquainted with Negroponte's differentiation between atoms and bits – wherein he wrote about the fixed and inconvenient format of atoms versus the flexibility and versatility of bits – the authors were still automatically purchasing the atoms. The clear alternative was an e-reader.

Half a dozen seminal background books were ordered and, through registering four devices to one Amazon account, all four co-authors had immediate access to them. They could see one another's highlights and read one another's margin notes.

There were definite advantages. A hand-held library makes the carrying and sharing of multiple books and journals feasible; readers can make notes and read other's notes; and the instant-download and compatibility features on multiple devices allow readers to simultaneously access and familiarise themselves with key materials in a short period of time .

There were downsides, however. Kindle e-books currently use location numbers rather than page numbers, making them difficult to cite; one user's repository can be shared with only six others; and e-books obtained from other sources may not be compatible with the Kindle. Despite these reservations, the capability to access, download and share the books and notes easily among a group is clearly useful.

Working It Out Through Wikis

The second learning experience was also in response to a problem. As the project moved from the background reading phase to writing first drafts, confusion set in. There were four authors. All four had written and published in the past and therefore had different ideas as to the paper's synopsis. Different and conflicting writing styles emerged. It is frustrating for those who organise their thinking in a linear manner, writing from the introduction through to the conclusion of the paper, to cope with authors who like to write in a different order, such as writing the introduction last.

The outcome was that multiple versions were being emailed around. No one knew whether he or she was editing the latest version or whether the document was a partial piece or a comprehensive draft. The solution to this was found through an act that the IT professors had been teaching their students to do for years: they started a Wiki. More specifically, a Google Site.

Google Sites is a Wiki tool that allows a user to collaborate or share a web page with as many people as they wish. Wikis are fully editable websites that facilitate collaborative authoring by allowing users to change, organise and update the information as they see fit. They are convenient online applications that allow access without any specific software or operating system, and are presented in basic HTML format so that even online novices can contribute without difficulty. Google Sites' editing functions are similar to a simplified word-processing program, including all the basic text-formatting functions as well as the ability to insert comments, links and images. Google Sites can also embed other documents or files into a web page.

Google Sites is not new but its full potential, and that of other interactive technologies, has not yet been realised in education.

Technology has been used traditionally as an effective document-delivery system through which educators have the ability to send mass messages, documents and other information instantaneously.

As with the Kindle, the benefits were totted up. Wiki pages are easy to create, easy to share and easy to update; they allow collaborative work on multiple documents; members can access the latest draft at any time and from anywhere; work saves automatically; and a revision history allows users to trace back to older versions.

Most usefully, whenever users logon, they automatically arrive at the latest draft. When collaborative work is supported by email, the risk of working on an old edit, or writing in a direction that is inconsistent with other contributions, is high. Through Google Sites, the arriving author begins where the last author left off, but if they want to revisit an earlier version, the interface makes this easy – especially relevant when authors do not agree to each others' changes. Google Sites can even link group members' calendars, documents, photos, presentations and videos. An update of assigned tasks and meeting times, and even a countdown to deadlines, is available for customised pages.

An Ever-expanding Reference Library

As writing progressed, so the source literature expanded exponentially beyond the initial e-books into an impressive collection of journal articles, often in multiple collections in multiple locations. Each author had stacks on their desks, sometimes collated into folders. Some were uploaded onto the Google Site under various headings. Some were cited in-text in the drafting of the paper. A few were ad hoc end-text referenced. The solution was a RefWorks library.

RefWorks is an online application that allows users to create, store and organise research references. Reference lists are created either by typing in the appropriate information or by importing the information from research databases. RefWorks allows users to create bibliographies from a list of references in the RefWorks library or from a paper embedded with references using the Write-N-Cite plug-in from RefWorks.

The application is user-friendly and easy to learn, with useful features that include libraries with full-text articles saved online for shared access; references imported directly from research databases; the ability to create reference lists in any referencing style; bibliographies generated in Word, HTML and RTF; and the aforementioned Write-N-Cite, which facilitates in-text citations that correspond to the RefWorks libraries and bibliographies.

RefWorks libraries proved themselves especially useful because they can be shared with multiple users. Once created, users can view, edit and add new references to the library. Maintaining an organised, hard-copy reference library can be challenging for any researcher but it is almost impossible with multiple researchers – RefWorks, however, makes it easy to do online.

Avoiding The Tower of Babel Effect

Anyone who has worked on collaborative research with multiple contributors knows that it is a potential recipe for disaster. It may be that after weeks or months of back-and-forth drafts and research between group members that there are multiple versions of the 'final' draft; that a portion of the work that may have been completely overlooked; or that no one ever thought to create a backup. In the end, more time can be spent trying to collaborate than on actual collaborative work – but utilising the Kindle, Google Sites, and RefWorks can make group work actually work. **ETS**

Dr. Shelley Kinash is director of the Office of Quality, Teaching, and Learning at Bond University on the Gold Coast, where Diana Knight is the project officer. The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Associate Professor Michael Rees and Associate Professor Dirk Hovorka that inspired this article.