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Web Reviews: From Sticky Notes to Mind Maps: Visual Collaboration Environments

Lisa R. Johnston

University of Minnesota, ljohnsto@umn.edu

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Web Reviews

Lisa R. Johnston

Reviews of web resources of interest to *SciTech News* readers.

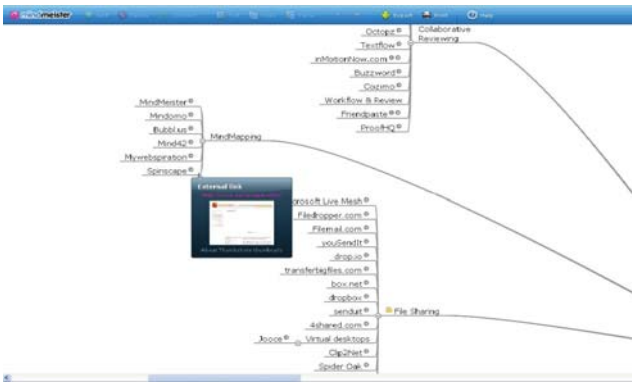
From Sticky Notes to Mind Maps: Visual Collaboration Environments

I use sticky notes, both electronically on my desktop and in the real world. They are invaluable to quickly jot down information that might slip away the moment someone walks into your office or that second mouse click takes you on to a new topic. Of course these precious bits of paper present new problems: how to connect those ideas, make sense of your various projects, and manage your time efficiently (Not to mention presenting your scribbles in such a way to effectively share with others!). Naturally I've been impressed with the electronic sticky notes popping-up on the web. These virtual mind mapping tools do all this and more. Going beyond the simple list tracking applets, like the popular "Remember the Milk" (http://www.rememberthemilk.com/), they can map and visualize your ideas, connecting the various threads of you latest article, and allow web-based collaboration with others, for tasking-out those larger group assignments. My notes still might not make sense to others, but at least they won't fall off the monitor when the glue wears out!

MindMeister

http://www.mindmeister.com/

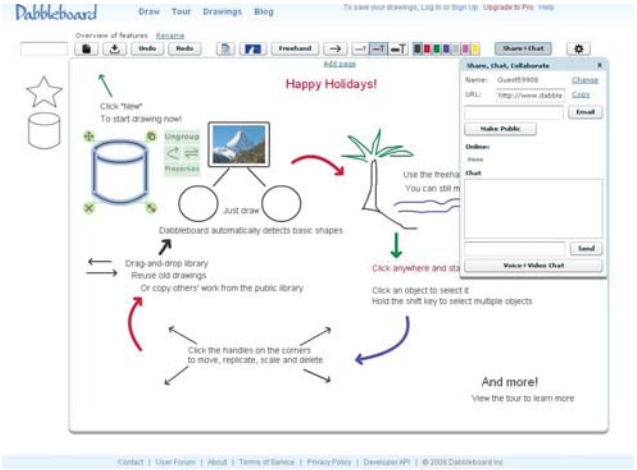
Fun, fast, and easy to use, this AJAX-based web application has a slick user-friendly interface and the free basic account is simple to create and gives you up to 6 free maps. Connectivity makes this application rise above the rest. Integration with Twitter, Skype, export options and, my personal favorites, the Firefox browser extensions and iGoogle gadgets, all really keep you in touch with your ideas! Premium accounts (to share with your library staff or university) range from $15 to $49 a year but include nice features such as an offline version, plus file attachment and search capabilities. A nice completed Meister map showing off the incredible features of this web-ware is at "Robin Good's Open Collaborative Map for LearningTrends2008" http://www.mindmeister.com/12213323 (pictured here).



Dabbleboard

http://www.dabbleboard.com/

A great tool for what it is: a freehand note pad. Additional features such as the chat tool is nice for collaboration while drawing. But draw features are difficult to use. Interface is not in-line with past learned behaviors (such as select and drag items creates a line, special button on each corner of an item controls functions like move, delete, etc.). Also the drawing area gets very small after only a few notes. Great concept, but may be only useful for doodles and passing virtual "notes" during class (or meetings!).



VUE

http://vue.tufts.edu/

VUE (Visual Understanding Environment) was created at Tuffs University as a way to integrate multiple media sources for learning

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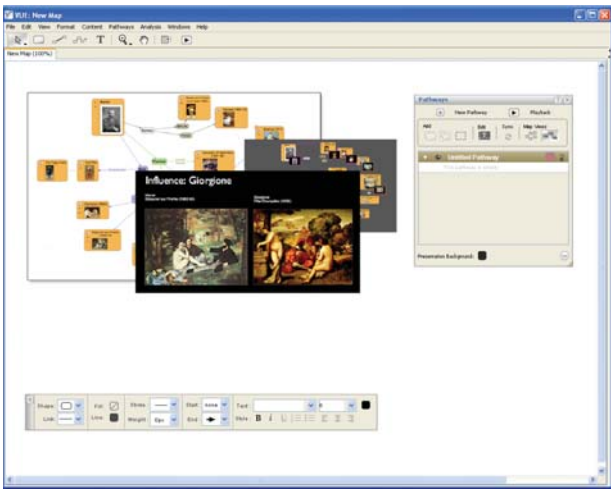
and education. As a result, this freeware can accommodate visual elements beyond text such as audio, video, and images. The built-in search features, ontologies and outline tool are great resources to help you build professional, impactful maps. And the new plug-in "Resources" connect this stand-alone application with useful academic web content from sources like Fedora, Flickr, JStor, PubMed (NCBI), and Wikipedia.



Stixy

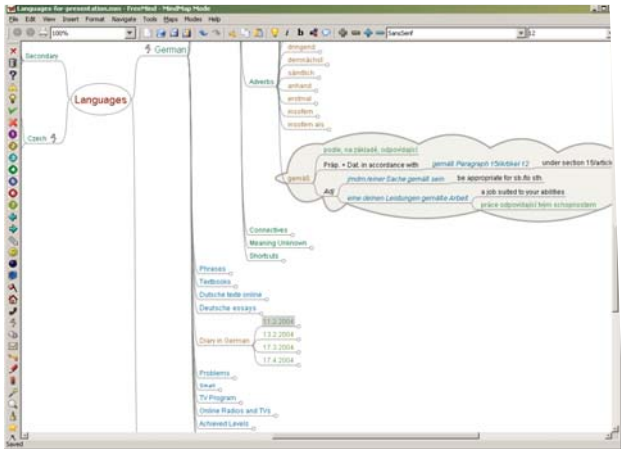
http://www.stixy.com/

Stixy is a virtual web-environment for your sticky notes…and it's really cool. The homepage of this site is a live demo that features the ease of creating new "widgets" for your notes, photos, To Do items, and documents. It might make a great environment to write an article with all of your reference article pdf's held in one mind map tool. Especially nice is the To Do widget that prominently displays the calendar date and can be set to email a reminder to you and your collaborators. Once you leave the site URL, all notes are saved and hidden from view. The downside of this cool tool is that the widget's large size fills up the screen quickly and your notes get a bit messy.

FreeMind

http://freemind.sourceforge.net

FreeMind is a java based software download that was created in 2003. With near two million downloads last year, this free software hosted on Source Forge is a very hot item. However the abundance of web-based applications doing relatively the same thing may outpace their success; their documentation page links to alternative applications.



Bubbl.us

http://bubbl.us

Very easy to use mind map that uses bubbles automatically placing themselves; creating a visually appealing brainstorming session with very little effort. Best of all, the drawing space is limitless and your map can grow to include all of your ideas without cluttering up the screen. I love the mouse and keyboard shortcuts that manipulate the web page, such as mouse scroll-wheel Zoom control and the Tab and Enter keys control the arrangement of the next bubble, making this a perfect note-taking tool during a fast-paced discussion. On the other hand, text appears to be the only accepted content for your bubbles at this time.

Twiddla

http://www.twiddla.com/

Twiddla calls itself a web-based meeting playground…and they are not far off. This is another literal whiteboard tool which is highly doodle-prone. Like DabbleBoard, the screen gets small after a few additions, but the draw tools behave more as expected. Another nice chat feature makes collaboration with Twiddla fun and visual. The Browse feature allows multiple users to "co-browse" the internet by viewing a web page and adding comments. This is a great concept, but difficult to implement in practice. On the other hand, there is no installation limit to the number of mind maps you save, so there is plenty of room from trial and error.

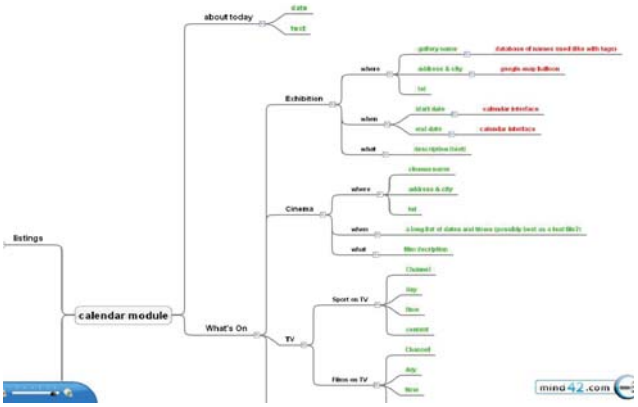
Mindomo

http://www.mindomo.com/

With similar features to MindMeister, such as web-based mind maps that can be created, edited, saved, and shared, Mindomo comes up short with its poor graphic quality and slow-loading interface. Their basic accounts are free and premium versions start at $6 a month. This

mapping software works both online and off with the additional installation of Adobe Air.

Mind42
http://www.mind42.com/
Rather than bubbles, Mind42 expands your ideas in the form of an idea tree. The nodes can be collapsed or expanded to present a concise picture of the detailed map you create. Though limited in features, the tool's minimal navigation and web-based approach make it one of the simplest mapping tools reviewed here. ❖



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