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5-7-2012

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Posted by Editor · May 7, 2012 · 1 Comment
Filed Under App, Course Management, Google Apps, Instruction, technology
About these ads   **Memo Cordova**

It was time to reorganize for the fall 2011 semester, which meant I was to teach an online course on library research, UNIV 106: a pass/fail, one-credit course:

University 106 provides an introduction to the library research process and basic tools a student needs to succeed in coursework at Boise State University and beyond. Students will gain proficiency using essential library resources while engaged in an academic research project and will become familiar with aspects of information in its societal context. In addition, students will encounter selected discipline-oriented library resources. ("UNIV 106," 2008).

Boise State uses Blackboard as its main content management system. Moodle is another. But we are free to use whatever platforms we choose. I have been teaching the main online UNIV 106 course since 2005. Since then it has evolved from a single, paper-based course into a hybrid of courses taught by several librarians. UNIV 106 is offered several times during the school year and delivered in a variety of formats: some are offered online, some in person; some are paired with English 102 courses (known as PoWeR: Project Writing and Research); and others are offered based on subject-specific areas (see our complete offerings at http://guides.boisestate.edu/univ106).

So we have flexibility as to the way and means we can deliver UNIV 106, both in person and online. But Blackboard has been the primary vehicle for delivering online courses at Boise State University. While Blackboard provides a strong means for creating, organizing, and managing both in-person and online course assignments and coursework, I didn't particularly like its lack of mobile-friendly output, the use of frames (where the web page are broken up into various areas), and lack of an autosave feature.

Enter Google

Much like its counterparts OpenOffice.org and Zoho.com, Google Apps for Education has an impressive array of productivity software. I first toyed with the idea of using one feature, Google Sites, as a course management website for UNIV 106 once it was announced on June 23rdof 2011 that its wiki-like product, Google Sites, was capable of automatically rendering content into mobile-friendly format. Unfortunately I had already created my UNIV 106 course in Blackboard for

the Spring of 2011 and was too late in the semester to change any of it. So, after putting this semester behind me it was time to ponder my delivery method for the Fall 2011 online version of UNIV 106 using Google Apps for Education. Google has made huge strides in recent years to make most of its Google searches and application suites render content according to the device viewing it; if you have a smartphone, pages in Google domains are rendered accordingly, without having to pinch & zoom to get the best possible view. Similarly, I wanted to have my online course be made readily available online and rendered accordingly.

So, why the Googles?

My decision to use Google Apps for Education to deliver my UNIV 106 course was based on several points:

Google as known quality: the university had migrated to the Google Apps for Education in 2008 for all university email services for students, faculty, and staff. Students since have had access to some of Google's best features, such as Google Docs, Sites, Presentations, Calendar, Groups, and similar applications since then.

Powerful point and click text editing features: Google Docs is a fairly well rounded word editor, and provides most of the necessary functionality available in Microsoft Word or similar proprietary software. And it was free.

Mobile friendly: Google's push for a more mobile friendly Internet is evident in its ability to make the entire line of Google products mobile-friendly and mobile-ready, both in content creation and in content delivery.

Autosave feature: one of my biggest peeves with Blackboard (besides its use of frames, and primitive and stilted text editing features) was its lack of an autosave feature, which has been available in Google docs for quite some time. Google autosaves content every 5 seconds–a truly ingenious feature where content is securely saved, even under catastrophic events, in Google servers.

Customizable content: Google offers an wide array of cosmetic features, such as color schemes and themes; ready-made forms to tackle just about any type of content delivery or function; and the ability to embed a wide variety of multimedia.

Targeted audience: Google Sites is meant for communal access, but it can also be restricted to specific members of a group. My course website on Google Sites was open to anyone who knew the complex URL for it, and since only my registered students knew the URL, my content was accessible only to them.

Online, 24/7: Google offers access to its productivity suite both while connected to the Internet, and while it is offline. Whatever content you create is readily available; no flash drives or expensive text editing software necessary.

Google support: for every product, Google offers an extensive array of support for each service, excellent video tutorials, help and support.

The experiment

I decided to create my UNIV 106 course using Google Sites as my main course management system. Google sites is a wiki, where content can be shared or remain private. My intent was to use Google Sites as the main course website, have students write their work using Google Docs, and maintain a grade roster in Google Docs.

My course would be based on teaching the basic concepts of library research using TED videos. TED is "a conference bringing together people from three worlds: Technology, Entertainment, Design." ("TED," 2012). However, since its initial inception in 1996, TED has grown into a literal smorgasbord of ideas beyond its original trifecta. To date, there are over 1100 videos of individuals who cover the corpus of human experience, from gaming to cancer research, to political adventures and scientific curiosities. It is a veritable feast of human ideas, and most are short of the 18 minutes allotted to each speaker. TED videos are free to watch online and each video is accompanied by a transcript of the talk in question.

The main research project required students to select one TED video of their choice, write a two to three page reflective essay about the video using Google Docs, and append an annotated bibliography of at least 6 resources that support, enhance, or clarify the TED video in question. Students were required to invite me, their instructor, and allow me "Can edit" privileges to their Google Docs work once it had reached a fairly completed draft. The benefits of this requirement were numerous:

- The reflective essay and annotated bibliography did not require any extensive text formatting, so Google Docs offered a simple yet full-featured and easy to use text editing system and truly paperless.
- By providing me editing privileges to each student's work, I was able to highlight, edit, and add comments directly into the text, at specific points or sections of text.
- Once students had a draft ready, they had only to notify me via an email invite that signified the document was ready for review–truly a paperless system.
- Students could address my edits and respond to my comments within each comment section, including in real time via its built-in chat feature, without leaving the document in question.
- Students were able to keep access to their essays private, save for my role as instructor.
- Google Docs provides a "Revision History" which allowed me to check the scope of students' edits based on specific dates and times. Similarly, no work was lost or irrevocably erased as previous versions could easily be chosen to be the most current one.
- Google Docs autosaves the work every 5 to 6 seconds, so even if there was a massive computer failure from the students' side the work would be saved and retained in Google servers. Personally, the auto-save feature one of the best features Google provides.

The course and the final research project would be completed throughout the semester.

Evaluation

Once the Fall of 2011 got underway and my UNIV 106 Google Sites was unveiled to my students, the entire semester went fairly smoothly. I had 42 students registered for my course, they being a mixture of freshmen, sophomores, juniors and a lot of seniors. This being an online course I only met a handful of students in person. My communication with students relied heavily on email, both to clarify content or address specific questions about the course.

For the most part students navigated the process well enough, having been used to the Google

environment before. Others had trouble figuring out how to navigate the course website, even though I spent a considerable amount of time making the process as sequential as possible, i.e. follow steps 1, 2 and 3. As the semester progressed, the majority of students were able to successfully invite me to their first drafts. A few had problems with how to "invite" me to their Google document, and fewer still could not figure out how to create a document at all. However, by the time the second draft and final essay and annotated bibliography were about to be due, all the students had successfully completed the process.

After completing the course, students were asked to complete a survey of the course. Of the 42 students who registered, 20 filled the survey. I have included an abbreviated set of comments (I edited content for grammatical purposes) that illustrate the merits of using Google Apps for Education for this course :

Which aspects of this course were most valuable to your overall learning experience?

- I found that the accessibility of this course was very much to my liking.
- Instructor communication
- Introduction to the TED talks
- This class added another dimension to its online appeal by including several informative videos on the subject matter
- The various units explaining how each section of the library worked. Being able to research things online
- TED
- ok so this is my second time taking univ 106 and i love that way the class is set up. i like ted.com

What barriers to learning, if any, did you experience in this course?

- No group interaction. Not very stimulating. Not very useful info for seniors.
- During the explanation of the card catalog system it would have been nice to actually be at the library and see the books. However the descriptions were good enough that I found I was a lot better about finding what I needed
- None. Great class and great experience
- using the google docs outside of blackboard classes or blackboard.

What did you like most about your online course experience?

- Using TED talks
- I liked that the instructor was always available via email.
- Learned about a new website TED videos.
- ease of access.
- It was literally the only course I took this semester that wasn't down-right confusing.
- I liked how simple the course was. The work wasn't over-the-top for a 100-level 1 credit class. It was just right. I also enjoyed that I could go at my own pace. I could get it done in a week and not worry about it if I wanted.
- it was simple and easy to understand

What did you like least about your online course experience?

- Being part of an "experiment" using Google docs, which I can attest do not work well at all.
- Microsoft office does not ever reformat submitted work, and allows me to edit my work. I do not like giving someone else the authority to share my work, either.
- That the course was not run through Blackboard. I had some difficulties using the web based site.
- No face to face interaction with the instructor, but then again that comes with any online course.
- Actually nothing about this class. it was great!
- Nothing. I loved it.

Overall, most students took the change from the usual Blackboard approach to the Google one in stride. Most had positive things to say about the course that didn't bear on the delivery of it, while a minority found the use of Google Apps less than desirable. However, when rating the overall experience of UNIV 106 and its delivery, most students were positive and and receptive to using a system that differed from Blackboard.

There are many takeaways and some limitations in using the Google ecosystem to manage an online course. Some Google processes that tend to mar an otherwise great product include Google's tendency–at least during my course–to upgrade Google Docs to a "cleaner" interface, necessitating a constant reminder that a newer version of Google Docs will be instituted in due time. Of course, once the change occurred it did dramatically alter the look of the previous version.

Other limitations include the use of Google Apps for Education–the model we use at Boise State–versus the regular Google environment. Google Apps for Education lacks many of the same features available in regular Google, such as Google Reader, Google Shopping List, Picasa, Web History, iGoogle, and Google Checkout. Also, Google Apps for education is limited to the period when a student is enrolled at university. Once a student graduates, the content in Google Apps for Education is no longer maintained or accessible to that student.

But these limitations are minor compared to the overall features Google for Education offers. As a course management system, it offers a powerful, highly customizable, and full-featured package delivery system. The learning curve is slight and Google offers a solid reputation for innovation and ease of use. For my needs in crafting a library research course, Google Apps for Education performed admirably.

Memo Cordova is an Associate Professor & Librarian at Boise State University's Albertsons Library. Memo received his MLIS in 2003 from the University of Washington's iSchool. Memo's research interests include the intersection of Web applications and technology in education, libraries, and everyday life. Find Memo on Twitter at http://twitter.com/m3mo.

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