USING GOOGLE SITES, GOOGLE GROUPS AND GOOGLE DOCUMENTS TO ENHANCE YOUR COURSE

Ed Lindoo, Ph.D.
H. Wayne Huizenga School of Business and Entrepreneurship
Nova Southeastern University
3301 College Avenue
Fort Lauderdale-Davie
Florida 33314-7796 | 800-541-668
772-260-1910 direct
ed.lindoo@scripps.com

ABSTRACT

Traditional ground-based courses offer nothing in terms of group collaboration outside of the classroom. Online courses are predominantly built on WebCT, Blackboard, Angel WorldClass or similar online hosting solutions. These tend to work well, but often fall short in the area of group collaboration. By using Google Sites, Groups and Documents, students will be able to setup secure group web sites where they can share and work on documents such as word, power point presentations, calendars and spreadsheets.

1.   INTRODUCTION

In ground-based courses, for example those that meet on campus, instructors often create groups and assignments for these groups that are worked on outside of the classroom. This typically means that students have to pick a time and place, perhaps the library, a local bookstore or coffee shop to meet and work on their group project. Many times this creates hardship on students as they have to try to arrange their schedules to meet the demands of the group.

Similarly, online courses, while bringing students together via online discussion boards, often fall short in the area of group collaboration. With the introduction of the free tools offered by Google, ground-based and online classes can be greatly enhanced, making the student experience a far better one. By using Google Sites, Google Groups and Google Documents, students will be able to setup secure group web sites where they can share and work on documents such as word, power point presentations, calendars and spreadsheets. This also works as a listserv where every time a posting is made within the group, members can be emailed that posting. Members can also send email to all group members just by sending email to the group. This is especially useful when you have a large course with multiple groups doing the same or similar group project.

In addition to sharing documents and private group areas, this paper will also demonstrate how a class calendar can be setup within Google. While this may seem trivial, this very powerful tool will allow teachers to enter assignments and due dates that the students can synchronize to their Outlook Calendar, iPhone, Blackberry or Windows Mobile device.

2.   POWER POINT PRESENTATIONS

Group exercises can be a great tool, in an online classroom, ground-based course, or both. Often we as the group to create a power point presentation summarizing their exercise. This can at times be difficult for the students. In online courses they often post their presentation to a group discussion board. A student comments on it, corrections are made, and the spreadsheet reposted. More students comment and more change are made and the presentation is reposted. With presentations often running in the 2-5 megabyte range in size, multiple postings are doing nothing more than taking up a lot of space on the schools server.

Then we have the case of ground-based courses where classes often meet once per week, or less. Students find themselves trying meet with their group members at night or weekends to review the presentation being worked on, or they end up email copies to each group member. Similar to the discussion board posting issue, multiple changes are often made and the presentation is emailed over and over again, and with the huge file size, some email servers will reject these attachments.

Google Docs solves both of these problems. By using Google Docs the group leader can log into his/her Google account, create the initial version of the presentation (or upload one they may have started on their computer), then share it with other members of the group. Only members of the group will have access to the presentation because they are the only ones that were sent the sharing information. As the group leader shares this presentation he/she has the option to allow others to only view it, or to view and make changes. The ability to let anyone change the presentation can be powerful because it takes the burden off of one person having to make all of the changes.

3.   WORD DOCUMENTS

Similar to the issues with power point presentations in online or ground-based classrooms, a group paper can present challenges. Trying to coordinate the submissions of group members and add these submissions to the master document, over and over again can be pain-staking work for the person in charge of the document. By using Google Docs, however, the group leader can log into his/her Google account and create or upload the initial version of the document, then share it with other members of the group. Again, only members of the group

will have access to the document because they are the only ones that were sent the sharing information.

As the group leader shares this Word document, he/she has the option to allow others to only view it, or to view and make changes. Allowing for everyone to make changes can be beneficial because anyone could fix a grammar or spelling issue as then peruse the paper as opposed to sending an email to the editor and waiting for the change to occur. It would also be helpful in the case where each group member is assigned a specific section of the paper to work on. They can work on that section on their PC then add it to the master paper which is being kept in the Google Docs workspace.

4.   SPREADSHEETS

Spreadsheets are a great collaboration tool but often are not used as such. Google Docs takes away all of the hassle by letting you create or post a spreadsheet within Google Docs, just like we did with the presentations and Word documents. Again, users can be given view only access or full editing access. By keeping the master version of the spreadsheet on Google, users can log in and view what they need or make changes if they have been given those rights. This can be useful for example when a group has been assigned spreadsheet work where each student will be doing their work on a tab within the spreadsheet. It can also be useful where there is simply one sheet and the group of students is being tasked with adding values to the main sheet throughout the course.

Spreadsheets on Google are also great for ground-based courses. Imaging a course where you have 50 students and you, as the instructor have to give each student a spreadsheet containing financial data on a fictitious company for a case study that they will be doing throughout the course. How do you get it to them? Email it to each of them? Bring in your laptop and have each copy it off to a flash drive? What if they need to make changes throughout the course? Or better yet, what if you wanted to give each student their own personal version of the spreadsheet where they will make changes to it throughout the course (online or ground-based)? Google Docs is the place to do it.

A final note on Google Documents: If two or more people are working on a spreadsheet, Word document or Power Point presentation, changes made by one person are almost instantly reflected in the other collaborators document(s). This is a very powerful feature in terms of group collaboration.

5.   GOOGLE FORMS

Google forms have a couple of uses. First, they can be used to create an online test. Second, they can be used to poll the student population, asking one or multiple questions. In both cases the form is tied to a spreadsheet within Google so that all of the answers are recorded in a spreadsheet for you to review.

Creating a new form is easy. From the Google Docs screen just click "New", then "Form" and a new window will launch with an untitled form. Give it a name and start entering questions. The questions can be text format, paragraph text, multiple choice, checkboxes, choose from a dropdown list (similar to multiple choice), or scale (1-n). The Google form does not have an option for automated grading, however since all of the answers are recorded into a spreadsheet which could be downloaded and formulas applied to calculate a grade.

Once the form is completed it is automatically published and a link is provided for you to give to your students. Since there are no logon requirements for this form, the first question of the form should simply ask for the students' name. At the end of the form the user will find a submit button. Clicking this will first prompt the system to check that all required fields have been filled in (for example a multiple choice question not answered). Once everything is verified the data from the form is written to a spreadsheet that is located in the form owners' account. Since the answers are written horizontally into the spreadsheet, the maximum number of fields allowed is 255.

6.   GROUPS

Google Groups can be very useful for both online and ground-based classes. For ground-based courses, Google Groups offers something that is only found in an online course…an online group meeting place. Google Groups is similar to the discussion board or forum in an online course without the need for having access to an online course.

The group is initially setup either by the instructor or a member of the group, then members are invited to join the group via email. Next a message is posted for other group members to respond to. There are various group settings that are controlled by the group owner. Some of these settings include who can view the group (anyone or group members only), who can view members, who can join, who can create and edit pages, who can upload files, who can post messages, and who can invite new members.

One of the most powerful features of Google Groups is that email can be automatically sent to group members every time a posting is made within the group. This makes the group forum act like a one-way listserv. In addition, files can be uploaded to the group site. This can be a big plus for ground-based courses that are doing group projects. Gone are the days of meeting at the library or local coffee shop to exchange files as these can now be uploaded to the group site.

On first look at Google Groups, an online instructor might question the value of this when they already have a discussion board within their online classroom. Challenging this thought, let's say you have four groups within your class. Rather than using the class forum which is probably a public forum, each group can create their own discussion board on Google Groups, making all information posted available only to the group members. They can then manage their groups' message board on Google and feel comfortable that no one else but the group can see their postings, not even the instructor, if this is how you or the group chooses to set it up.

Google Groups can also be set up to work like an assignment dropbox. To accomplish this, the instructor simply sets up a group and in the settings check the box that says "All messages are held for moderation". Since the instructor is the moderator, students can post their assignments to the group forum but only the moderator will see them since they will only get released to the group if the moderator chooses to do so. Imagine the usefulness of this for an instructor in a ground-based course, or even an online class that doesn't have a dropbox.

7.   CALENDAR

A calendar is a calendar is a calendar, right? Wrong! For any course, online or ground-based, using Google calendar will keep students on track and focused to not miss deadlines. As an instructor you can create multiple calendars (one for each course you're teaching) and either painstakingly type each assignment deadline into the specific dates on the calendar, or you can create a comma delimited text file (CSV) that can imported to the Google calendar. This is the better way to go since it can be used over and over again, changing only the dates as needed. CSV files are typically created using MS-Excel and saved in the .csv format. The power of Excel can be used by creating formulas that automatically change the dates based off the start date of the class, making this even more user-friendly.

No matter how you get all of the assignments and other class related dates and deadlines into the calendar, once they are there the calendar is shared with the class members. This is done by sending the student an email invitation to join the calendar. Once the student connects to the calendar they are able to see everything that the instructor has put into it. When the calendar was created there were many options available. One that should be set is "view only" for anyone but the creator. In this way, students are not allowed to add or change entries.

Now the power of Google calendar comes into play. This calendar can be downloaded or synchronized to MS-Outlook, iCal or Mozilla Sunbird, and mobile devices such as Windows Mobile, iPhone, and BlackBerry. This is really a "value added" item for the students. Since many people today (students included) are using one of these applications for their personal calendar, importing class entries into their calendar keeps everything organized into one place for them. Finally, event reminds can be set up to send the student a reminder of anything that is due.

These can be setup by the students themselves and can go out minutes, hours, or days in advance of the event, as email or SMS text messages.

8.   SITES

Google Sites allows the user to create a simple webpage. It's often nice to have students share their background and experiences at the start of a course, but not all online systems offer webpage creation for students, and of course ground-based courses have nothing for this.

There are two ways that you can have students set this up. First, you can simply ask them to go to Google Sites and create their own web page. Ask them to include a photo and any relevant information that you would typically ask them (create a bio). The system is quite intuitive and needs little explanation as to how to use it. Pages can be shared with the world or kept private, allowing only those invited by email to view it.

Another option is for the instructor to create a class website within Google Sites. This would be the main page of the site. Next, students are invited (via email) to create their own personal page on the class site. Just a few simple instructions are needed to guide them through adding a page to the class site. As students add their personal page to the site, others have the opportunity to view these. It can be a lot of fun seeing what others in the class look like, especially in an online course where face-to-face contact never happens.

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References

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