

Creating a Strong Virtual Presence to build Collaborative Knowledge Centres through the Learning Commons

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Abstract

School libraries need to have a straightforward and efficient method to create effective virtual spaces that support learning, collaboration and engagement. These virtual spaces may include web pages, wikis, blogs videos, podcasts, tutorials, web 2.0 collaborative spaces including shared documents and possibly social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. This short paper will discuss simple to use technologies that allow school libraries to have a very effective online presence.

Introduction

Students now read books using tablets and ereaders, research is done predominantly online using a variety of tools including databases, research links, shared docs and search engines. Also more and more students have 24/7 access to online resources through their portable devices, including smartphones. In their personal lives many students spend more time online than they do in classrooms. The virtual presence of a school library or learning commons is becoming more and more important each day

I will share some of the technologies I have used that are relatively easy to use, are available on any device with a browser, free and have a proven track record.

Background

The Ontario School Library Association (OSLA) received a grant from the Ontario Ministry of Education to create online resources to help students from grade 7-12 learn financial literacy. I was the lead project leader and help developed the web page, chirpy.ca. In 2010 I received another grant from the ministry to develop online resources to engage at-risk students with learning through the use of technology (engagestudents.ca). Over the last 3 years I have taught the computer science qualification (intermediate/senior) to teacher-candidates at the Faculty of Education and Professional Learning at Trent University where the course focus is on creating effective virtual spaces. I co-wrote a book with Dr. David Loertscher and Micah Melton on implementing cloud computing into schools [Google Apps For Education](#) (see [getgoogleapps.com](#)).

Challenges in creating Great Virtual Spaces

The number one challenge for most teachers when trying to learn new technologies is the lack of professional development. Often PD is limited to one or two workshops a year. To really learn a new technology, teachers often have to do most of the learning

by themselves. This is why it is important that the types of technologies that teachers choose should be relatively easy to learn.

Another challenge is that some school boards mandate the use of certain technologies (e.g. asking teachers to use inferior web development tools such as First Class's Rapid Web Developer) or using technologies that are only available at school or only run on PCs and not Macs. When using a technology, teachers should be able to access it on any computer, including Macs at both school and home. These technologies should be available for free.

Some school boards also are resistant to the use of some collaborative web 2.0 tools such as Google Apps, blogs and wikis for fear that student privacy may be compromised because data is held on internet servers outside of the board's control (cloud computing). In my opinion the risk of students losing their privacy is extremely rare. I have not heard of one case since I have been researching cloud computing over the last four years. Students are in much greater danger of losing privacy using social networks such as Facebook where they post personal pictures and make personal comments and often are not aware of how to use privacy settings. At my school of 1000 students we average more than one case of cyber bullying every week, often with the police involved, with students usually using Facebook to bully. Google Apps, which has been used in my school for over four years, with students from grade 7 to 12 (all with full email and chat access), has never had one incident where I have had to speak to students.

Implementing the Cloud and using Google Sites to create a web page

Google Apps Education is a free (business pays for the same service) full cloud solution where all applications including email, word processor, spreadsheets, presentations (like PowerPoint), web pages, forms, videos, podcasts, calendars, image editing software run from the cloud and work on any computer, tablet, smartphone with a browser. Google documents can be shared so that is much easier to collaborate in groups. The working environment is consistent (same look and feel) no matter what computer or portable device is used, so that more time is spent on being productive than learning the technology.

Google Apps is the number one cloud provider in education around the world and is used by 61 of the top 100 rated universities and colleges in the United States (US & World News tinyurl.com/61of100) and is being quickly embraced by boards in Ontario including Waterloo Region, York and both public and separate boards in Ottawa.

For the teacher-librarian the best tool is Google Sites which is a web page application that allows for collaborative web page development. Google Sites is simple to use and

allows for the integration of Google documents, calendars, videos, podcasts, images, research links and more. Anything put on the web page can be done collaboratively (i.e. you could have students have access to different web pages to collaborate and build knowledge centres). A good example of is the virtual war museum assignment (see tinyurl.com/vmuseum2009) done by grade 10 history students at my school. The assignment required students to populate museum war rooms, such as “The Literary & Poetry Room for the First World War” with text, images, links and videos if available. The virtual museum is 3 years old and growing as students with each history class update and add to the web page. The museum is now used by teachers as a teaching resource and is accessed through the school library’s web page.

Anyone can create a website using Google Sites for free simply by creating a gmail account. To see how to create a site, embed images, videos, documents and calendars go to my tutorial at tinyurl.com/sitevideo.

Shared Documents

Among the many advantages of cloud computing is the ability to share documents with multiple editors. Not only does this allow for collaboration but the documents can be embedded into web pages.

Google documents can also be edited in any portable device with a browser including smart phones. I can easily update the “What is happening in library” document, which is embedded on the main page with my smartphone (tinyurl.com/aslions).

All documents can be password protected, record the names of collaborators and keeps a revision history for security.

Video is the way to go

In early 2008, Cindy Sargeant our school’s student success teacher and myself were introducing podcasting to students in our school (grades 7-12). We found that we were repeating the podcast lesson over and over again so we decided to create a video tutorial on how to create a podcast and post it on YouTube (tinyurl.com/tutpodcast). A day after we created the video, Cindy was teaching podcasting to a grade 9 locally developed English class. She mentioned to the class that it is funny because she just created a video on creating a podcast the day before from the exact spot she was about to teach a “real lesson”. One of the students said, “Why don’t we just watch the video.” Cindy laughed and said “but I am right here.” The students insisted on watching the video. Cindy was curious as to how well the students would learn from the video so she asked me to come and observe the students. To both of our astonishment the students were more engaged by the video than they were from a “real” presentation. Since that day over four years ago, we have only used the video to teach podcasting. The video

has been watched by classes and students almost 9000 times from both home and at school.

If you watch the video tutorial where Cindy uses the computer demonstrating the podcasting program Audacity, you will notice that the video shows what Cindy is doing on the computer screen as she speaks, with both the screen and her voice being recorded. This is called video screen capturing and was done with a small easy-to-use program Smartboard recorder, which is available for free to teachers who have access to Smartboard notebook software.

I have used Smartboard recorder to make dozens of videos. For teacher-librarians they are a great tool for creating videos on how to search catalogs, databases, plagiarism, book talks and internet research.

I post these videos to YouTube and embed them on the web page for easier access. You can also create a YouTube channel, specifically for the school library, so if students follow the channel anytime a new video is released; students receive an email notification automatically.

You do not have to create the videos. I will often get students to help videotape, edit post them to YouTube. Teacher-candidates are an excellent resource and most of them know how to do video. This library orientation (tinyurl.com/libtour) video was create solely by my teacher-candidate and has been seen almost 450 times.

Blogging

Blogs are designed to have an idea, a statement, an opinion or a question posed and then commented by contributors. Blogs can be very good for generating on-line open discussions, however they create an environment where students can flame each other unless there are security provisions.

Another challenge is that students need to some technical training to work with blogs. The teacher also has to take time to learn how to blog and set up privacy settings. Many blogs allow for students to search through other blogs where the board's internet filtering is not effective and students can easily be exposed to inappropriate blogs.

I find an easy, simple and secure method of blogging is using a single Google Doc for each blog that is shared with a class. Students do not have to be given any technical training because Google Docs is just like using a word processor. Also it is very secure and only allows students with access, the right to read and write on the blog. As well it

automatically records who typed what and keeps a revision history. The Google Doc can also be embedded within a web page to allow others to read it as an option.

OnLine Forms

Google allows you to create online forms that can be used for gathering all kinds of useful information.

- A form for students to request books to purchase
- Find out what skills students have. For example create an online form to find out if students know how to use electronic databases or how good their technical skills are.
- Use forms to allow students to register for book clubs.
- Survey teachers as to resources they need in the library
- Get feedback from students as to what they like about the library and if there should be any changes.

Forms can be embedded easily into a web page. See an example of my book request form on my library web page (tinyurl.com/getabook).

Conclusion

A learning commons or school library must have a strong virtual presence to remain relevant where students and teachers can collaborate and build knowledge centres.

Teacher-Librarians have very limited time so it important to choose tools that are easy to learn, are a cloud solution, work on many devices and are secure and protect students' privacy.

The applications should integrate with each other, for example embedding a Google Docs into a Google Site. The application should have no or a limited corporate tie-in (i.e. little advertising).

The company that has developed the application should be sustainable. Many tech companies go out of business, drop services or start charging for services. If a company goes out of business or stops supporting services you could lose all your data.

I think the best application for building an effective virtual presence is Google Apps Education. It is a proven professional cloud solution that offers extensive applications. Google has stated that it will never charge for its educational version and is a company

that is sustainable. Also many governments and millions of businesses use Google Apps so there is little chance of them dropping the service. Google Apps is proven to be very effective in improving learning and is the number one cloud solution for educational institutions around the world.

For more information go to: engagestudents.ca.

References

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