

Integrating Google Suite for Higher Education

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Google Apps is a powerful communication and collaboration tool accessible via the web, so you can connect with others in your organization 24/7, no matter where you are. The software is free and web-based so there is no hardware or software to maintain or install, making its use flexible and easy. Check your email, search an address; view, search, create, mark and share locations on maps, schedule meetings, chat in real time, collaborate on documents, and more. The use of the Google suite of tools -commonly known as Google Apps- is causing quite a stir in the academic and corporate environment. Google Apps provides several collaborative methods of doing business in both environments. The features include individual and group collaboration on documents and spreadsheets, searching maps and using information retrieved in geography classes, and replacing your campus email system.

Why is Google Apps are Important to Higher Education?

The name "Google Apps" is collectively used to describe the effort started by Google to provide users with additional tools to aid in the search for information. The list of Apps and special utilities that can be used in higher education is as follows: Gmail, Google Docs, Google Maps, Google Earth, Google Scholar, Google Calendar, Blogger, Google Pages, and Google Mobile. Google Apps provide users with an integrated set of tools that can enhance classroom instruction. Google Apps can be incorporated into instruction in varying degrees such as using a clip from Google Video to augment a classroom discussion or group collaboration through Google Docs/Spreadsheets.

Google apps could present challenges to business or academia that are concerned with the security of posting company information on a website outside the control of the organization. Also, there could be problems associated with normal entry of programs such as logins and credential authorization. These of course, would not be controllable by the organization, but by Google. But challenges are also benefits. An additional aspect to be considered are in terms of the efficiency of the applications, problems or kudos since they reside on a web server, which is not company, owned, costs related to licensing, privacy issues, installation and minimized maintenance issues, security pros and cons, and enhanced pedagogy.

Pedagogically speaking, Google Apps are tools that allow faculty to increase productivity of their students while maximizing the use of learning objects based on visual, auditory and tactile content. Faculty will be teaching with up-to-date content and in many cases with access to a wide variety of learning objects never imagined before. Google Apps can be used to demonstrate procedures regardless of the location in or outside of campus. The ubiquity of the web can make students more independent and mobile by creating everything on web-based applications and freeing themselves of USB flash drives or other physical devices. This will encourage and provide a user interface never seen before with everything happening in one environment, one space on the Internet with one user id and password.

The use of Google apps comes as part of the new web, Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005), where the web is more dynamic and the user publishes, discusses and becomes part of the content. The characteristics are especially appealing to Millennials which is a term coined to refer to people been born between 1981-1994- in what is commonly called the Net Generation (Prensky, 2001; 2001a). These students grew up accustomed to the Internet, DVD's, CD's, iPods, social websites, text messaging, cell phones, PDA's, and instant messaging. It is important that they learn how to multitask with all of them. Millennials are a different breed of learners since they mostly access content on-demand this includes: communicating, interacting, researching, socializing and learning with peers.

Academic Outreach at East Carolina University, North Carolina, is currently using Google Apps to share all

project documentation including Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. This has eliminated email traffic and given everyone a robust environment in which to collaborate. In the future, it could be used as a place to publish research material. There are major universities that switched their email systems to Gmail including:

Trinity College, Dublin
Arizona State University, USA
Northwestern University, USA
University of North Carolina Greensboro, USA
Clemson University, USA
University of Texas San Antonio, USA
Kennesaw State University, USA (Google, 2007)

How are Google Apps Evolving?

As more services and applications are developed, Google Apps might continue to appeal to higher education audiences. The applications can be used without having a main computer, server-based applications accessible from everywhere give Google Apps an advantage to client-based apps. The future looks promising as more of these tools and applications can be integrated into the curriculum. The increased usage and interest in Web 2.0 applications, increased collaboration, sharing and publishing of content makes Google Apps an excellent resource to consider adding to a class.

Conclusion

The world is smaller than we ever knew and Google Apps provides an opportunity to exceed space and time limitations. As Google continues to add applications and services that might be of the interest to the higher education community, it is possible that higher education institutions consider and evaluate other economical options for web-based applications with instructional value. There is always more information and now a space to put that information.

References

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