How Can Document Sharing Tools Help Students Collaborate?

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John Orlando: Hello, and welcome to this 20-Minute Mentor on how to use document sharing in the classroom. I’m John Orlando, and we’re going to be going through three different document sharing systems that will help produce better results in your classroom. So let’s get started.

Now, why would you use document sharing software? The most important reason is that they foster group collaboration. Now, group collaboration is very important because it’s been proven that students learn better in a group environment when they can bounce ideas off of one another and work together to produce projects.

However, group collaboration is not easy to do with the traditional technology. For instance, let’s imagine you want a group of students to produce a report together. Well, they may send versions of the report around with email attachments, but then they get different versions floating around. Students start making comments on old versions. The comments get lost, and it becomes hard to synthesize those versions. If instead, the students decide to send one version to one student at a time and then send it back and forth, it becomes very time-consuming to make those changes and to develop the documents.

Document sharing software solves this problem. With document sharing software, the documents are posted online – meaning that there’s only one version of the document. Students then make all edits to that version. You don’t have to worry about multiple versions floating around. Also, the changes are made in real-time. The students don’t have to worry about making a change and having someone see it two or three days later after someone else has made a change. The changes are immediately viewable to everyone else who’s working on the document.

And finally, the edits are tracked all in one place so students can see who has made what changes and what changes they’ve made. And most important, the teacher can see who has been making the various edits on the document. This can be very important if the teacher wants to insure that everyone has been collaborating on the project.

Now, there are a few rules you want to follow when you make group projects. First, keep the numbers relatively small in a group project. If you have a group of say 30 or 40 students all working on one project, very often students’ contributions may get lost, or a student may not feel comfortable making contributions that will be seen in front of the entire group. So keep your numbers to five – maybe ten at maximum. If you have 30 students in a class, and you want everyone to get involved in a group project, just make three or four different group projects.
Second, when you create a group, assign a few roles in the group. Don’t just say, “Here’s your project; go to it,” because one problem is that students may have a kind of first-move problem where they’re all looking at each other to be the first mover – the one to take the lead. So it’s a good idea to actually assign someone to be the leader – to take the initiative – to basically start the project going, and you might even say to moderate the discussion of the project. Also, you may want to assign someone to record all the meetings the students have had so that you know how many times they’ve met and basically what’s going on to insure that the project is moving forward.

Next, you want to assign development tests. For instance, you want to tell the students, “By the end of this Friday, I want the outline done; by the end of next Friday, I want this done.” and so on and so forth. This keeps students on task. If you simply say, “By the end of the month, I want a finished project,” you very often will have some students who wait until last minute, not contributing and saying, “Well, we don’t have to do anything until the end of the month,” and then two days before the project is due, they’re scrambling. So it’s better to make a timeline, so that you check-in at different points along the way.

And finally, one of the big questions you’re going to have to answer is do you do individual or group grades? And of course, there are pros and cons to each. On one hand, students may feel that individual grades are fairer than group grades because individual grades allow students to be given a grade according to their particular contribution. On the other hand, sometimes you may want group grades to give them the sense that they’re all in it together; much like a business report, the report will reflect on everyone so that they all have a vested interest. Individual grades – the students may just kind of do their own part and not worry about the entire picture. So there are pros and cons to each different method of doing things.

Now, today we’re going to talk about three different software applications that will allow you to do group document sharing. The first is wikis, the second is Google Docs, and the third is Adobe Buzzword.

Now, wikis are becoming very well known, and I think most people have either seen Wikipedia or some wiki system. The strength is that they’re very good for web-based presentations. They have a format that’s built for the web, and they’re amenable to web view. Also, students can very easily post material to them, including links and video that’s pretty much made for the web.

The weakness, though, is precisely in that they’re made for the web so that they’re really not made for print. So if you want a printable document –
some kind of paper version that you will eventually want to look sort of publishable – that a wiki is not going to look as good. You’re just going to have to print the – basically the screen, and it’s really not going to look like a publishable document.

Now, let’s take a look at how to develop a wiki for your students. Here’s an example of a wiki I made for our Master of Science in Business continuity management program called Business Continuity Resources. The idea is that as students find resources during their research in the program, I would like them to post those resources to a central repository. This way, other students will get the advantage of having those good resources to go to in their own research. In essence, they’re getting a kind of vetted repository of the best resources in the business continuity profession. And while currently the wiki is closed, eventually we may actually make it public so that the public can’t edit it, but they can take a look at this, and students will actually see that they’ve added to the profession as a whole.

Now, I built this particular wiki using PBwiki, a free software program. You’ll notice that there is a wiki name at the top and a heading, and underneath it is a little bit of a description of the wiki as well as information about the administrator – who to reach for questions. Now, the important part of the wiki is that I created a scaffolding. You don’t want to simply tell your students to build a wiki and not give them any direction in how to build it or the format because very often they’ll have a lot of discussion and disagreement about the basic format, and this may give them a hard time getting going on the wiki.

So what you want to do is give them the initial push – the initial shove – by building a scaffolding. Set up the initial categories so this will determine how the wiki will be structured. So I’ve structured my wiki according to these categories of products, career resources, professional organizations, government agencies and so on and so forth; in other words, the type of resource. There could be other ways of setting up the wiki, but that’s simply how I did it. So the students, when they see this, they know where to go and where to put things.

So for instance, let’s hit products. While I’ve created the basic scaffolding, I haven’t created the substructure, so the students themselves created the subcategories. In this case under products, they’ve divided it into software, data backup, and crisis communication. Now, of course, this is a work in progress, so more categories and more resources will come up. But you see under software we have Strohl Systems, which is a link.
when an individual sees that, and they feel it’s a good resource, they simply click it, and they’re taken to that.

Now, a nice thing about wikis is that students post not just links, but comments as well. So the student has said something about the resource. It says, “Strohl Systems is the most popular business continuity software,” and there’s software for different areas of business continuity. Now, other people can add their own comments to this. So for instance, they can say, “Strohl Systems has very good software in this particular area, but not as good of software in other areas.” So they can actually provide information for their classmates to help guide them.

The same with something like Professional Conferences – they can say, “This professional conference is really geared towards this type of individual,” or “has strengths in these areas, but I would not recommend it for someone who’s looking for something else.” Notice, this is the kind of background information you wouldn’t get from simply webpages, but this is how you can socially construct information, and by adding their own views, students actually get to provide commentary on resources, and they really find that exciting.

This is a very, very nice way of having students collaborate on projects. At the right-hand side here, you see all the various edits that have been made recently. These are all front-page edits that have been made by myself, and then you see an edit to the Events section that’s been made by this student here. So you can track who has done what.

The next resource we’re going to look at is Google Docs. Now, Google Docs is a free application by the Google Company. Essentially, what they’ve done is they’ve taken a word processing program, and they’ve put it online so the documents, and all the word processing functions, are put on a server; all the work is done on the server itself rather than on the individual’s machine. This gives you the strengths that you can determine who has access and control of the documents. That is, you can determine that some people can edit documents; others can just look at documents. And this system allows quite a bit of formatting capacity, especially the kind of formatting capacity that you like to see in what will eventually be a print document.

The weakness is that it’s not very easy to track individual contributions and really see how a document has developed; I’ll show you what I mean by that. Here’s an individual account page for Google Docs. Notice that here is where the documents appear. I just happen to have one document up here at this particular time. On the left-hand side, there are different categories that I can use to organize the documents. I can put up those
documents that are owned by me by clicking this button, and also
documents that have been opened by me by clicking the second button.

There are hidden documents. I can trash documents. I can create folders
for multiple documents. Over here, you notice that there are seven
collaborators. So I have shared this document with seven other people.
Now, let’s open this document and take a look at how the formatting
works with this document. The first thing you should notice is that it
looks much like a word processing document – the kind of document
you’d find with Microsoft Word. You have the File, Edit, View buttons
just like you’d see with most word processing software programs and all
the various buttons here. So it’s very, very familiar.

You also have this “Share” button up here, and you note that I can share
this document by sending a link or inviting people or publishing it in
various ways. So I’ll click “Share.” Here I can invite people; all I have to
do is type an email address here to share a document. I’ll just type some
letters just as an example. Then down here when I do share it, I can share
to edit or just to view. So I can give individuals two different capacities:
the capacity to change a document or just view it. The subject line is the
title of the document, and I can put in a message such as, “Please give me
comments on this document.” When I hit “Send,” it invites the individual
to start sharing the document.

Now, I’ll show you in here how you can check the revisions that are made.
You hit the “Tool” function and click “Revision History.” Here you see
the various individuals who have made changes to the documents. Here
are the login names of the individuals, and over here are the changes. “No
text added” just means they’ve made some kind of other change. Here
they’ve added this sort of text.

And I can order the revisions noticed – first, second, third, fourth, fifth. I
can order them by who has made the changes and so on and so forth. The
only weakness now is that I don’t have a context as to where the changes
have been made. That is, I can’t see within the document how the
document has progressed as individuals have made their changes. So you
lose that context. The strength, though, is I can pick a particular
individual, and I can see all the work that that individual has done. So
from a teacher’s perspective, you can check on a certain individual making
sure that they’re doing the work you want them to do in developing the
document.

Finally, we’ll go to Adobe Buzzword. Adobe Buzzword is a wonderful,
free software system created by Adobe. Much like Google Docs, this
allows you to post documents to a server that a variety of people have
access to, and much like Google Docs, it has the kind of functionality that
you’d expect of most word processing programs. Some of its strengths are that it’s much easier to track the contributions that are made by each individual than is currently the case with Google Docs. You can also track who has opened a document – there’s a nice little interface that allows you to see that. Also, the formatting functionality is very easy to work with.

The weakness is it has fewer word processing options than other systems right now, including Google Docs, and that’s partly why the formatting is easy. It just kind of limits the kind of functionality. And as Adobe says, they’ve taken the functionality that 99 percent of the people use, and they have not worried about the functionality that very few people use. So you get a more limited range of functions with Adobe Buzzword. Now, let’s take a look at how it works.

Here you have my account page in Adobe Buzzword. Signing up for an account is very easy; it takes 30 seconds – all you need is an email and a password. Much like Google Docs, when you sign in, you first see all the documents listed. Now, there’s a little less information, but it’s organized in, I think, a very, very nice way. Now, right now the documents are organized alphabetically: A, B, C, D, E. But I can switch it so that it’s listed by author.

Now, I happen to be the only author on these documents, so “Me” becomes the only individual listed; but if there are other people, who are the authors that I’m sharing with, I can see each of those individuals. And by the way, you can load a photo of yourself. So if there’s a variety of people working on a document, say, in an office or a school, you can actually see photos of the individuals to see who worked on each document with a little image – which is kind of a nice feature. I really like that.

You also can organize them by when you viewed the document. Notice, I viewed today, Sunday, July – and so on. I can reorganization the documents according to when they were changed – “Changed Today, Changed Yesterday,” and so on and so forth. I can also list them by size – one-page, two-page, three-page, six pages and so on – and then list them by role, meaning author or some other role like reviewer.

Now let’s take a look at a document I’ve created. This is a document that I will be publishing, and I asked my students to give me some comments on it. One thing you’ll notice is as you scroll down the documents, you see the comments that are made by various individuals. Not only do you see the comment – it says, “Added the” – but it shows right in the text where the comment has been made. This is a really nice function. I can really see the context of different edits. Also, notice that different individuals’
comments come up in different colors. So I immediately see that this comment was made by someone other than this person.

The changes show up much like a “Track Changes” in Microsoft Word – if you’re familiar with that – you can see what they are. You can always reverse the change, if you want, or not. Down here, you see the various individuals who’ve worked on it. You also see the role, such as role “coauthor” and when they opened it. So opened current version on this date, and this person opened the current version on that date, so I can actually see when they opened the documents.

And around the Adobe office they call it the “Tattle Tab” because let’s imagine you send a document to ten different individuals, and you run into one of them the next day, and you ask them, “Well, what did you think of my document?” and they said, “Oh, yeah, I liked it,” and then you go back and you find out they never opened it. Well, you know you got ‘em! So that’s a nice little function that you can actually check if you send a document to a bunch of people who’s opening your document. You can get the “Revision History” down here and take a look at it in terms of the history of all the revisions.

You have all the various functionalities that you use – you can change fonts. You can change paragraph. The way it appears is a little different – a little unique – a little unusual. I happen to like it, but it’s something a little different and it takes some getting used to. Here on the right-hand side you have a numbering feature. There are a number of things that you can do which are nice here. I’m going to close this particular document.

I am going to open a document that’s created by the Buzzword people called “Welcome to Buzzword.” This document – when you sign in, I would take a look at this – explains all the different functions. One of the things you notice about Buzzword – if you look at how documents are put together – the images and how it looks – it has a nice, very sort of professional feel to it. If you publish the document, it’s not going to look like the old dot matrix typewriter look. It’s going to look almost like a professional brochure look.

The other thing is they did a really nice job of creating the functionality so that you can move pictures around and you get automatic text-wrap, and it seems to wrap very well. With some other word processing features or systems, the text doesn’t seem to wrap quite as well. You can also resize text and things like that. So there’s a lot of nice little functionality and moving back and forth with the Adobe Buzzword – moving text around and moving images around which are really kind of the modern functions you’d like to see in a document that you would like to print and I have ook really nice.
Finally, sharing a document – it’s very easy to share. You hit the “Share” button at the bottom left, and you simply type an email address, and you give the individual role – either coauthor, reviewer or reader, and each of these gives a different capacity. You can also share with a wider audience, and you can make the documents public as well. This is a very nice little system that allows individuals to collaborate on documents, track who’s done what, and make documents that look, I think, very professional.

With that, we’ve gone over three different systems that allow you to use document sharing in your classrooms. Now, these are systems that, once again, help foster group or collaborative learning. Collaborative learning, once again, has been proven to be a much more effective way of learning than simple isolated learning, and these document sharing systems can allow the instructor to build projects and actually monitor how the project develops. You can actually watch who has done what, can see the project developing as it develops, and can provide individual feedback on each project as it grows and each person who contributes to the project.

Thank you very much for watching this video. We would like to hear what you have to think. Please click the link that you see on your screen now, and fill out the survey, and tell us what you think of this 20-Minute Mentor. Thank you.

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