

Using Google Sites to Enhance Group Communication

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Introduction/need for innovation

The *National Research Agenda (NRA): Agricultural Education and Communication 2007-2010* (Osborne, n.d.) states that graduates should be prepared to enter the workforce with the skills necessary to meet changing technical demands. Organizations are increasingly utilizing computer technology to communicate and share knowledge in the form of virtual teams (Yoon & Johnson, 2008). These online-based teams offer organizations “unprecedented levels of flexibility and responsiveness” and have the “potential to revolutionize the workplace” (Powell, Piccoli, & Ives, 2004, p. 20).

With computer technology becoming an integral part of the workplace, these techniques should also be utilized in the classroom. Students report that involvement in some sort of computer-mediated communication group assisted them in grasping concepts taught in the classroom (Althaus, 1996). Some students even suggested that computer-mediated communication techniques were an effective substitute for face to face collaboration. These techniques are not only used to expedite traditional communication, but have proven to increase academic performance in those who actively participate (Ocker & Yaverbaum, 1999). A combination of these methods, as well as face to face collaboration, has shown to provide a superior learning environment in comparison to a traditional classroom setting (Althaus, 1996).

Google Sites, the chosen computer-mediated communication tool for this project, is a website that facilitates group work. Members of the site can work together to attach files, information from other computer applications, and other personalized content. Only basic computer skills are needed to navigate the site and, if preferred, the site can be published to the entire world. Also, the Google Sites application can be accessed from any device with Internet access.

How it works

The purpose of this project was to incorporate Google Sites in an undergraduate agricultural communication course that uses face-to-face instruction and collaborative projects. The Google site was developed to enhance group communication and cooperation on projects. Before the start of a course, five individual websites were created in Google Sites, one for each group in the class. The instructor demonstrated how the Google site was to be used and explained how it was integrated with the course curriculum. The instructor served as the owner of the site and sent an email to each student’s individual email account inviting them to join the Google site.

Students were encouraged to use the attachment and comment features on their group site to communicate with their group members and to submit assignments to the instructor periodically during the term. Each Google site contained several features including an assignment list that could be checked off when completed, a sidebar that offered a countdown to deadlines of various assignments, and several places where important messages and information were posted by the instructor and teaching assistant.

Results

Data were collected from students in the course using an online survey developed in SurveyMonkey™. Only one of the respondents had used Google Sites prior to the classroom experience. Over half (53.8%, n = 7) of the survey respondents subscribed to receive e-mail notification when changes were made to their site. The attachments feature seemed to be more popular than the comments feature, with 76.9% (n = 10) of respondents having posted attachments as opposed to 30.8% (n = 4) who posted comments. Many utilized email to communicate with group members in addition to the site features (61.5%, n = 8).

Overall, respondents indicated the Google Sites were easy to use and contributed to their performance in class. Based on open-ended comments, the most popular feature was the ability to post assignments and comments for both the instructor and teammates to view. Some stated that the site was confusing to navigate and suggested that there be a simpler format and design. The majority of respondents (75%, n = 9) suggested use of the Google Sites program in future classes.

Future plans/advice to others

Google Sites will be used again in the course to enhance group communication. To improve utilization by all students, they should receive participation points or another incentive to post comments and attachments. Several students never joined their group's Google Site and relied on group members to e-mail them information. Requiring the use of the Google Site features (such as posting attachments and comments) will provide students the opportunity to experience the full benefits of this collaboration tool. Instructors should encourage students to post assignments to the Google Site that will benefit their groups' work in the class. This practice also provides another storage location in the event of lost or misplaced files. In addition, one student in each group should be given "owner" status so they can delete old attachments and comments.

Costs/resources needed

Google Sites can be developed at no cost. Students need a computer with access to the Internet in order to access the options offered on the application, but this is within normal course requirements.

References

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