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The Online Editor: Teaching Media Writing with Google

Google Docs (formerly known as Writely) began October 10, 2006 as a free word-processing service (i.e., web app) that promised to greatly enhance research and teaching productivity. This paper focuses on its potential to facilitate the teaching of writing skills. According to *Quill*, "a signature trait of Web 2.0 - today's second generation Internet - is collaboration.... Google Docs, makes it possible for two or more reporters to work simultaneously on a story - or for all students in a journalism class to contribute to an article. It can ease the anguish, and maybe salvage friendships, when producing a multiple-bylined story" (South, 2007, p. 29).

Google Docs lets users edit and store their working manuscripts online. It also lets students share their manuscripts with their teachers. Versions of documents are tracked in a fashion similar to collaboration features embedded in word processors like Microsoft Word, but the storage function is the major differentiating factor. Google Docs is better than e-mail attachments because the files stay on the Google server where they are password-protected. Instructors can invite their students/colleagues/collaborators to co-edit manuscripts -- or they can designate their access as read-only. Users can store up to 5,000 documents, each occupying up to 500KB of space. One need not worry if student or colleagues use Microsoft Word because Google Docs has its own full-featured text editor. Indeed, public computer kiosks can be used to edit documents without concern for platform (Bishop, 2007).

Microsoft Word still offers superior formatting for final documents, so one can download documents from Google Docs back to a computer as Word or RTF files for final formatting. But while the manuscript is on the Google site, users are no longer limited by their access to a computer with Word on it, or the most recent version of a particular manuscript.

In a world with just two computers, one located at work and one at home, the location of files is manageable. But now that people often have multiple computers, at work and at home, shared among several users, not knowing which one will be available allows users to procrastinate until they are in the desired workspace. Some writers report that they have lost countless hours because a file they needed was at home or at work or on the "other computer." Google Docs is terrific for those ten or twenty minute blocks of time when it would otherwise seem too much trouble to edit a class project or manuscript. Finding a document on a classroom instructor computer is nearly a certainty, as is locating documents on networked lab computers.

Users no longer have to carry around electronic copies of working manuscripts and worry whether the version on their laptop is the same as the version on their thumbdrive or the same version they just sent or just received from a collaborator. In the case of students in media writing classes, files cannot be lost or confused. With Google Docs, everyone involved in the creation and evaluation of a document knows exactly where the most recent version is, because there's only one file readily accessible from the Internet.

In addition to a word processor, Google Docs was originally paired with an Excel clone to produce spreadsheets. Google Docs later added presentation application similar to Powerpoint. As with Google Docs, the spreadsheets and presentation files reside online behind

password-protected firewalls. The latest addition is a “forms” utility inside spreadsheets that allows the creation of online surveys where collected data automatically populates the cells of the linked worksheet. Paying for solutions like SurveyMonkey is a relic of the past.

One testament to the success of Google Docs one year after its release was that Microsoft released its own online collaboration scheme in late 2007, which allows storage of only 1,000 documents and, more detrimental, still requires that the work be done on a certified copy of Word. Microsoft now offers a free, Web-based service that works with Word, Excel and PowerPoint to let people store and access files online. The service, called Office Live Workspace, also lets users collaborate on documents remotely over the Internet" (Bishop, 2007). Another feature, called "Shared View," allows people see a collaborator's desktop in real time to observe changes that they make in a document (Microsoft PressPass, 2008).

Google (n.d.) also released its own public relations information that Google Docs "helps to fulfill the stated goal of The National Council of Teachers of English, which espouses writing as a process and encourages multiple revisions and peer editing." According to Google, instructors are using the documents feature of Google Docs & Spreadsheets both to publish announcements about upcoming assignments and to monitor student progress before the final draft is submitted. Through a document's revisions history, the teacher can see clearly who contributed to what assignment and when; if a student says he or she worked on a given project for five hours, it will be documented. Students themselves can check to see how the revisions have progress and who has helped.

Google reports what media writing teachers use Google Docs to facilitate peer editing and revising. Instructors can see who is collaborating within groups. (Google, n.d.) Thus, one of the key benefits for instruction is the revisions history that gives an exact tracking of

previous versions by date and contributor. More important, teachers can confirm that the process has even begun: When documents live on thumbdrives, instructors must trust their claims to be working on something. Like Bentham's panopticon, Google Docs gives the power of surveillance to the writing coach. The advantage to the students is that they never have to remember when or where to save their work -- Google Docs does it automatically.

Contributions to pedagogy

While grading student writing, the same comment is often typed over and again. One good suggestion for those who coach student writing is to archive into a single file any boilerplate comments that you might want to use again and paste them verbatim to a corresponding problem in any given writing draft. The issue of "teacher as editor" versus "teacher as coach" may serve as another vantage point to evaluating Google Docs (Masse & Popovich, 2003). Nonelectronic editing lends itself to circling misspelled words and similar small-margin editorial functions, but electronic editing lends itself to writing longer notes because the document is not so much being "marked" but instead having "comments added." This may seem like a subtle difference, but the absence of a hard-copy submission should prevent abbreviated editor-like comments.

Also, "ability groups" (Bunton & Kanihan, 2000) are easier to form and maintain with Google Docs. Bunton & Kanihan (2000) found that "students in ability groups tend to share similar skills or deficiencies, and instructors can therefore efficiently address those issues in the ability group" (p. 70) Comments made via Google Docs to underperforming teams can be more directive than with average or overperforming groups.

Discussion

Again, there are some drawbacks to Google Docs. Aside from the privacy issue (or concerns that Google is too large not to be evil), Google Docs does give a seamless transfer to full-featured word processing programs. Students sometimes complain that paragraph indentation is often lost, so it may be necessary to format paragraphs with an extra linefeed between paragraphs to facilitate reformatting in Word. In my own experience, students do best with Google Docs if they create their documents online first and then move them to Word or Excel, although Google Docs supports either option. Students can readily "share" their drafts with instructors or group collaborators and they can "publish" their drafts to public spaces via a Google-generated URL address.

Future research should examine the relative success of courses taught with or without Google Docs. In the meantime, the anecdotal evidence is firmly in support of using Google Docs rather than hard-copy drafts or emailed files. Grading is easier because there is only one current version of a document and previous versions demonstrate the writing process over time. Questions of plagiarism essentially fade away with assignments created and submitted via Google Docs.

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