Google Goggles: The Dawn of Distributed Cognition for Educators
Part 2

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By Mark Szymanski

Google Docs. Think Microsoft Office. There are many reviews available to read about Google Docs. The ReadWriteLab [1] has a nice article comparing the features of Google Docs to Microsoft Office Live. The conclusion is familiar. Most products that are created in response to a Google product fall short in their technical elegance. But one way in which Google Docs surpasses the competition is in its simple built-in features to facilitate collaborative work. From a cognitive science perspective, and a learning perspective, Google Docs facilitates distributed cognition. It’s thinking and working in a Web 2.0 world, a world that K12 educators have generally been slow to embrace.

Steve Downs, of the National Research Council of Canada, states that Web 2.0 “is not a technological revolution; it is a social revolution…It’s about enabling and encouraging participation through open applications and services…with rights granted to use the content in new and exciting contexts…It enables the Web to shift from being a platform in which content is created, shared, remixed, repurposed, and passed along” (Downs, 2006) [2].

K12 educators have struggled to integrate the rapidly evolving Web 2.0 technology into their daily practice precisely because they have tried to integrate the new tools into their daily practice—which hasn’t changed much. It isn’t every educator’s struggle. Many educators, schools, and districts have embraced the Web 2.0 world and have told stories about paradigm shifts in their own thinking and practice. But, that’s the point, K12 educators, like any other person integrating Web 2.0 tools into their practice, have to rethink their practice. This can be difficult for educators who work in systems and schools that insist on Web 1.0 thinking and practice.

Google has perhaps compounded this problem. Historically, they have been a leader with web-
based work, and I would argue, until recently, have been a bit too far ahead of educators in their applications.

Over the years, the Google Educators’ site [3] has evolved into a very useful one for K12 educators. There are a wide range of applications and now, even a way to become a Google certified teacher. The effective change is that Google has slowly developed products and tools for educators that more precisely reflect the current needs of teachers. This is where Google Docs lands on the continuum. During the early days, Google educator tools naturally had a clear focus on being web-based. This worked fine for Google, but not for educators who have been slow to adopt web-based tools and were just getting used to a Web 1.0 world.

There are a number of variables that contributed to this. First, a reliable Internet connection and computers in students’ hands was the problem. Over time, this has changed and we can now safely assume most students have access somewhere in their world. Second, there was a culture of Microsoft Office that was cemented in schools. Some educators were very skeptical of leaving a safe world, even though that world was laden with software bloat and the inevitable upgrade. Finally, as I referred to in the beginning, educators, like all professionals have had to reconsider their work in a Web 2.0 world. In this case the physical and temporal nature of schools has not changed. So, to ask educators to consider using a Web 2.0 world in their practice created a cognitive dissonance that proved debilitating to most.

In the Web 1.0 world, most students and teachers continued to operate in ways that reflected a back and forth one-to-one way of working. This practice was based on a competency model of learning that was not distributed in nature. Meaning that people learn about a body of knowledge, and create a product that reflects their understanding that will be assessed. This also meant that to get a clean assessment, there was no collaboration allowed. Well, as collaboration has become common practice, educators have begun to discover that collaboration, formerly called “cheating,” was a more accurate reflection of how work is done in the real world. This helped to nudge things forward.

So, it seemed to make sense for educators to begin with the familiar, an Office Suite. It’s the baby step forward that Google now provides educators. The next challenge for educators is to consider how to use the Web 2.0 features of Google Docs. They have done so in a wide variety of ways that are not technically complex, but in practice spread cognition across a community. For example, in the past, I had my students submit papers after they received feedback from students. I had no way of reading the comments, but with Google Docs, the writer can identify the people who are allowed to comment on the writing online. The same is true for the spreadsheet, and slide show tools.

In addition to the collaborative production features, there are the collaborative sharing features when products are complete. Slide shows can now be posted online and of course can be commented on after the fact. Consequently teachers can set up shows for other students to critique. Of course, Google also allows these documents to be linked to their Google calendars...
and many other tools. The point is that the simple act of moving to a Web 2.0 environment with familiar tools is an effective way to involve anyone in the collaborative process. It’s a simple solution that may be an elegant solution as well.

As the sun rises on a new day for educators, it’s much different than the 1.0 sunrise. In the new day of the Web 2.0 world, Google has taken a step back and extended a hand to K12 educators who might have felt like they were running after an accelerating train. And did I mention it was free???

See Part I

Endnotes


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