

TechMatters: We're in this Together: **Using Technology to Facilitate Collaboration, Part I**

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Libraries tend to be highly collaborative institutions. We frequently organize ourselves into teams in order to solve problems, implement services, and accomplish our goals. Our teams are often very diverse; they may include librarians and staff members from a variety of departments within our organizations. We also collaborate with individuals at other institutions, sometimes at distant locations. Despite these challenges, we are tasked with working together as effective teams in order to meet our goals.

At the Central Michigan University library, I lead the web services team tasked with development of the libraries web site, one of our most important instructional tools. Team members include librarians, support staff, and a student assistant. Although we all work in the same building, our offices are not all on the same floor, and most team members have responsibilities in other departments as well. We take a team approach to all of our projects: we need to communicate, share ideas, and work together in order to move forward with our goals. In order to do so efficiently and effectively, we have adopted a variety of technologies to facilitate our collaborative work. Some are free, and some are not. All are fairly common. Certainly, none are “on the bleeding edge”. Nonetheless, as a busy instruction librarian you may not have had the chance to experiment with them and so might appreciate a glimpse into how these simple tools can be used to support teamwork and collaboration.

Instant Messaging

As we all know, chat or instant messaging (IM) applications allow real time written conversations between individuals over the Internet. Popular IM clients include AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), Yahoo! Messenger, MSN Web Messenger, and Google Talk. For our purposes, the CMU Library web team has opted to use Windows Live Messenger because we find that it offers features and functionality beyond basic text messaging that make it an ideal tool for both routine communication and working on significant collaborative projects.

Windows Live Messenger
<http://download.live.com/messenger>

Using Windows Live Messenger's basic text messaging functionality, team members are able to communicate with one another quickly and efficiently. We are able to get feedback and/or fast answers to simple questions that allow us to move forward with work on individual components of team projects (see Figure 1). Of course, there are times when individuals may not want to be interrupted by a text message question. Fortunately, it is very easy to change your status to “busy”, “away”, or “on a call” to let your colleagues know that you aren't available to answer questions. In addition to talking one on one, it is also very easy to invite other individuals to a conversation to allow group discussion and decision making without getting everyone together in the same room. Windows Live Messenger allows group conversations with up to 15 participants.

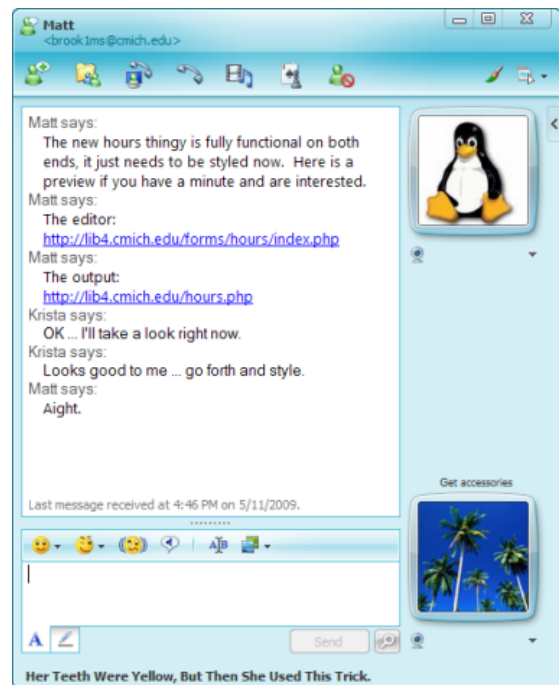


Figure 1: Collaborative chat in Windows Live Messenger

In addition to text messaging, Windows Live Messenger allows file transfers, video conversations, and even the ability to allow remote desktop sharing. Transferring and sharing files using Messenger couldn't be easier. To send a file to a team member, all one needs to do is open the regular chat window and then drag and drop the file to send into the area where you normally

type. The recipient will be asked to accept the file which they can then open and view in the native application (e.g., Word for .doc files, Adobe for .pdf files, etc.)

Another way to share documents using this software is to setup a “sharing folder” that is accessible to you and one of your contacts. These folders create a space on your hard drive, as well as a synchronized folder on your colleague’s hard drive, where documents and files that you want to share with one another can be stored and then accessed by either of you. Setting up a folder is as easy as clicking on the “Share Files” icon and then selecting “Create a sharing folder” from the drop-down menu. Once you have setup a shared folder, you can then drag and drop any items that you want to share with your colleague directly into the folder window. Using this feature is an excellent way to work on co-authored documents when only two members of the team are sharing the work.

Provided you have a web camera and either a microphone or a microphone headset installed on your computer, Windows Live Messenger can be used for video conferencing between two individuals (see Figure 2). Unfortunately, this software does not allow shared video chats between groups of users. Nonetheless, the ability to participate in a face to face communication with team members despite physical distance can be useful for discussing more complex issues than can easily be discussed via a typed conversation. And again, once you have your web cam installed on your computer and properly configured, initiating a video chat is as easy as selecting an option from the menu and waiting for your colleague to accept your invitation to join the video conversation.

Perhaps the most distinctive of Windows Live Messenger’s collaborative features is the ability to share your desktop with a contact. This functionality is particularly useful in cases where viewing program settings is important, or where you need a colleague to see exactly what you are doing in order to offer a solution or even take control of your desktop and fix the issue themselves. As with the other collaborative features of Messenger, “remote assistance” is very easy to enable. Simply right click on a contact name, and then select “Start an activity” and then “Request remote assistance” from the resulting menus.

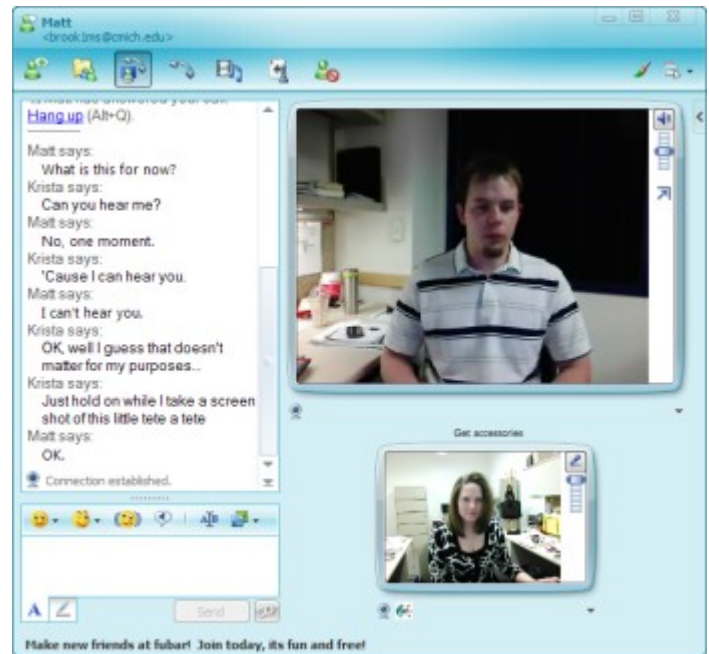


Figure 2: Video chat using Windows Live Messenger

Shared e-mail

Another simple, yet effective tool that the CMU web team uses to help us collaborate is a shared e-mail account. Through our campus information technology (IT) office, we were able to request a separate team e-mail address. All library staff members have been asked to send requests for team assistance to this shared account, rather than to individual team members. As a result, requests can be handled by the first person who reads them, and/or assigned to the most appropriate team member for action.

Because CMU IT operates an Outlook Exchange server, we are able to setup Outlook profiles on each of our computers to access the shared mailbox. Basically, this allows each of us to access the shared mailbox using our personal logins and passwords. Of course, not all organizations provide this type of mail server setup. Nonetheless, it is very easy to setup a team e-mail account on any of the free e-mail services such as Gmail, Yahoo, or Hotmail. Of course, if you choose to go this route, you will need to share one group login and password.

Sometimes faster really is better ...

Given that the members of the CMU web team all work in the same building, it is true that the tasks for

(We're in this Together ...Continued on page 10)

(Student Peer-Teaching ...Continued from page 9)

Choinski, E. & Emanuel, M. (2006). The one-minute paper and the one-hour class. *Reference Services Review*, 34(1), 148-155.

Dabbour, K. S. (1997). Applying active learning methods to the design of library instruction for a freshman seminar. *College & Research Libraries*, 58(4), 299-310.

Germain, C. A., Jacobson, T. E., & Kaczor, S. A. (2000). A Comparison of the effectiveness of presentation formats for

instruction: Teaching first-year students. *College & Research Libraries*, 61(1), 65-72.

Senecal, K. S. & Fratantuano, M. J. (1994). Active learning: A useful technique for freshman library instruction. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 1(2), 139-152.

Walsh, J (2008). The effects of library orientations on student usage of the library. *Library Hi Tech News*, 25(1), 27-29.

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which we use instant messaging and shared e-mail could be accomplished using more traditional communication methods such as team meetings, telephone conversations, personal e-mail, and/or in person office visits. However, we have found that by using these tools we are able to communicate more expeditiously, and just as effectively, which has significantly increased our overall efficiency.

For example, our programmer often needs someone to test new site functionality. In the past, he would send an e-mail and then wait for a response. Now, he can quickly identify available team members, send a chat message including the link to the page to be tested, and get a response within a matter of minutes. He can then use that feedback to immediately continue working on his project. Similarly, we have significantly improved the turnaround time for implementing requests for routine web page changes through the use of our shared e-mail account.

Conclusion

Obviously, chat and e-mail are two simple to use and widely familiar technologies. As such, they are ideal collaborative tools since most team members will already be comfortable with their basic use. Of course, depending on the culture and makeup of your team there may be one or more members who are resistant to using such tools. They may be disdainful of tools like chat that they think of as "always on", because they fear that constant interruptions will impair their ability to get work done. In such situations, I hope that you can use some of the information provided in this article to discuss the management features that mitigate this issue (e.g., the "away" feature), and more importantly, the collaborative benefits for your team.

Although using these two technologies for collaborative work may seem like a simple idea, we have found that few of our colleagues are taking full advantage of these tools to enhance their collaborative work. With just a small investment in setup time, we have found that you can get quite a bit of "bang for your collaborative buck". In Part II of this article, we will move on to discuss a slightly more complex tool designed to provide a collaborative workspace.

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During the last part of the session, Mason gave the LOEX audience a taste of a three hour "improv workshop" he has conducted; all 80+ audience members participated. The first game was called "Yes and . . ." Mason began with various leading sentences such as "A 50-foot basketball rolled down the streets of Albuquerque crushing buildings in its path..." Each person following said "Yes and (fill in the blank)" which produced themes ranging from Godzilla to zombie librarians. The second game involved two audience members reciting a poem at the front of the room. The first person said the poem in a language they did not know (e.g., Russian) and the second person "translated" it, often with

hilarious results. These exercises encourage teamwork and build confidence in performance skills.

Mason made good on his promise that we would "discover a new sense of fun, learn how to make our students laugh a little, and add some silliness to a profession that can take itself a bit too seriously."

For more information about the conference, and the PowerPoints and handouts for many of the sessions, including from all the sessions listed in this article, visit the website at <http://www.loexconference.org/2009/program.html>