TechMatters: Bits and Bytes: Techno snacks for the busy "Back to School" season

Krista Graham, Central Michigan University

It's that time of year again, when the lazy days of summer have faded away, students have returned to the classroom, patrons pack our libraries, and for those of us in the library instruction business, we are in the busiest season of the year. If you are anything like me, you probably find it difficult to find the time during the fall to identify and explore new online tools. To make that task a little bit easier for all of you this year, I offer the following brief introductions to a few interesting web applications that I discovered during my summer "instruction hiatus". Hopefully, you'll find something here to inspire your instructional efforts, or just to help you get organized during the busy year.

Thinkature

http://thinkature.com/

Thinkature is a free, web-based collaborative workspace. After creating an account, users have access to a whiteboard application where they can add content and create visual representations of their thoughts and ideas. Right in the browser window, without the need for any additional software, users can insert images, create freehand drawings, and add, edit, and format text boxes to develop flow charts. After creating a workspace, users can invite colleagues to join and collaborate synchronously. Once inside, users have access to all of these features and can communicate with one another via an embedded text/video chat application.
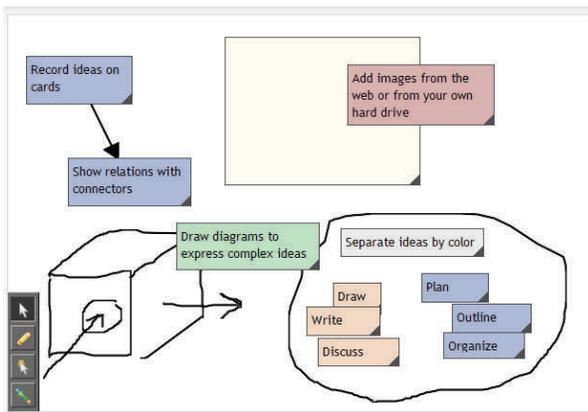

Figure 1: An example of a Thinkature collaborative workspace

In my opinion, Thinkature has great potential as a classroom tool. Consider how this application could be used to allow students to create concept maps collaboratively in order to develop a research topic. In addition to helping students easily develop visual representations of their research topics, this tool could also be used to encourage students to collaboratively question one another and work together to strengthen and improve their ideas. Additionally, Thinkature would be a great tool for students working together, (even if they are not physically together), during the planning stages of a large scale group project.

Diigo

http://www.diigo.com/

Diigo is a cross between a social bookmarking site, an annotation tool, and a collaborative research environment. In order to use Diigo, you must first setup a free user account and then download and install the Diigo toolbar. Having done so, you can use the toolbar options to bookmark, highlight, and add comments to any web page (Figure 2). Additionally, you can add tags to your bookmarks and annotations to organize them for future use.
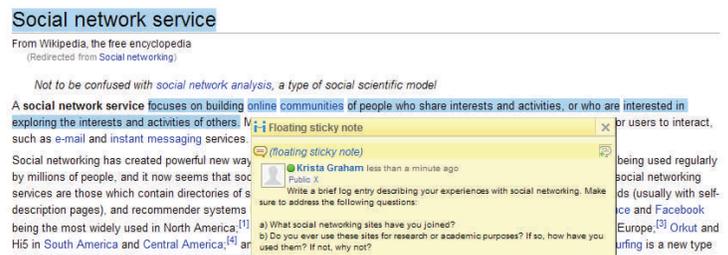

Figure 2: A web site highlighted and annotated using Diigo

In addition to serving as a valuable tool for organizing individual research, Diigo can also be used for team-based projects. By forming a Diigo group, students can work together on collaborative research projects. They can share the information sources that they discover, as well as add notes and annotations that can be viewed by all members of the group. Of course, you might also choose to use this tool to identify and share useful information resources with your students, or you could even use Diigo to develop and share reading/writing assignments with your students.

Todoist

http://todoist.com/

Todoist is a free, online task manager that you can use to get, and stay, organized throughout the year. With

a simple and relatively intuitive interface, getting started with Todoist is a snap. After registering for a free account, you will be taken to the "info page" which provides a series of short, concise reference guides to help you get started.
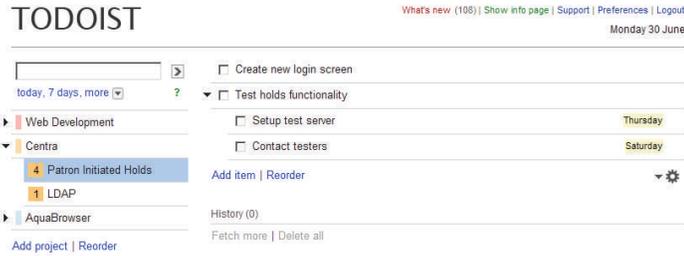

Figure 3: An example of a Todoist project task list

Todoist allows you to organize your tasks into projects. Each project may then include a list of tasks that can be organized into hierarchical levels (see screenshot). For each task, you can easily assign a due date or priority level, add notes, or create a link to related documents. When a task is marked as completed, it is moved into a project history folder that you can use to review your progress and/or accomplishments.

In addition to the free version, Todoist offers a "premium version" for $3.00 per month which offers some additional functionality including reminders sent to your e-mail or cell phone, and SSL security and encryption if you intend to store sensitive information.

Zoho

http://zoho.com/

An alternative to Google Docs, Zoho provides an impressive selection of productivity, collaboration, and business applications. In addition to providing versions of the "big three" office applications, (word processor, spreadsheet, and presentation tool), Zoho also offers a chat application, online planner, wiki, project management tool, web conferencing application and other similar tools. In general, Zoho's applications are free for individual use with a subscription fee for organizations for some of the business applications.

Why consider using Zoho when so many people are already more familiar with Google Docs? Well, in my opinion the Zoho office applications are more full-featured than the extremely stripped down versions offered by Google. In addition, Zoho also offers other interesting applications, such as Zoho Polls to create and post online survey questions, which you won't currently find in Google. If you are looking for a robust tool to facilitate collaborative work on projects wither in or out of the classroom then Zoho is another option worthy of consideration.
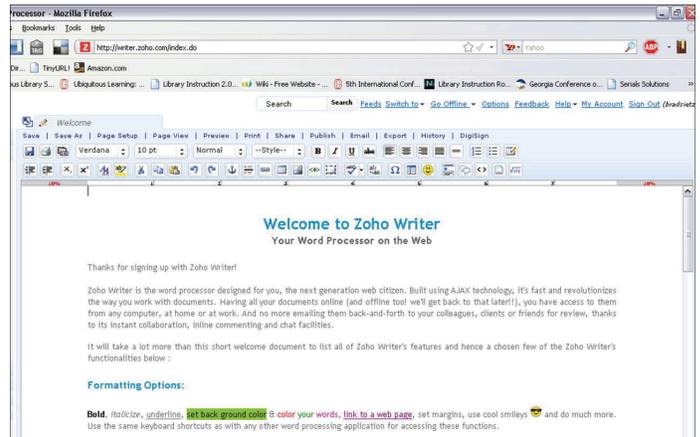

Figure 4: A screenshot from Zoho Writer, one of the many applications available in Zoho

Whether you are looking for new instructional ideas, or simply trying to get organized, I hope you'll find some inspiration, or at least useful functionality, in one of more of these online tools!

Blazing Trails: On the Path to Information Literacy

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Albuquerque, NM

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