

TechMatters: Piecing Together a Free Online Instructional Toolkit

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If you work at a large academic institution, chances are fairly good that your organization provides access to a “course management” or “virtual learning” system such as Blackboard (<http://www.blackboard.com/>), ANGEL (<http://www.angellearning.com/>), or eCollege (<http://www.ecollege.com>). Such systems include features such as collaborative workspaces, drop boxes, grade books, and discussion boards to facilitate online teaching and learning.

Of course, not all of us work at institutions that provide these types of tools, and for others these learning systems may be too dauntingly complex, as they provide more functionality than is wanted or needed for our particular instructional purposes. Lucky for us then, that a variety of free tools are available online. When taken together, or separately, these tools can be used to create our own e-learning environments.

Collaborative Workspace

Collaborative workspaces allow groups of individuals, who may be separated from one another by location and/or time, to work together on documents, projects, or presentations. Rather than requiring participants to e-mail copies of their work to one another, documents are stored online so that they may be accessed by all group members and updated in real time.

Google Docs

<http://docs.google.com>



Google Docs allows users to create or upload standard office files including documents, spreadsheets, and presentations. Once a document is added to the system, it can be accessed and edited from any computer connected to the Internet via a standard web browser. The Google Docs interface includes a selection of familiar formatting features, such as bold, italics, and bullets, using toolbar buttons similar to those found in most “office” programs, including Microsoft Word and PowerPoint.

Once created, the document author may invite others to read and/or collaborate on a document. Editing occurs in real time, so multiple users can work together simulta-

neously and immediately see changes as they are made. If you assign any type of group project, this sort of application can be a powerful tool to help students work together successfully.

Discussion Board

Discussion boards - also referred to as web forums, discussion groups, or bulletin boards - provide space to hold online discussions and post user developed content. In general, such tools facilitate group discussion and interaction, and may encourage collaboration amongst students.

Google Groups

<http://groups.google.com/>



Like Google Docs, Google Groups is a free service that requires only that you create a “Google Account” for access. Creating a new group site is as easy selecting a name, providing a brief description, and then inviting users to join your group. Users may then initiate and respond to discussion topics and post documents. Clearly, this tool could be used for a variety of purposes from establishing an area to compare notes, files, and ideas for students involved in group projects, to providing a forum to allow attendees to continue discussion following a workshop or instructional session.

Drop Box

Drop box applications provide online space to store and share large files. If you want students to submit assignments to you electronically, but have limited space in your e-mail inbox for large attachments, then a digital drop box like Drop.io may be just the tool that you need.

Drop.io

<http://drop.io/>



Drop.io is a slick service that allows you to create a private drop space without requiring you to create an “account” or provide your e-mail address. Simply choose a name for your drop, select a password, decide when you want the drop to expire, and determine if you want

others to be able to “view only”, “view & add”, or “view, add & delete” files in the drop. At that point, just send your students the URL for your new drop site and they may upload files for your review. Alternately, you can send your students the e-mail address that Drop.io creates for your site, and they can simply send the files as e-mail attachments that will be automatically uploaded to your drop space.

Grade Book

An online grade book is a useful tool for anyone who is teaching a course with graded assignments, tests, quizzes, and/or homework. Using an online tool to store and calculate your grades allows you to make this information easily accessible for your students at any time and from any location.

Engrade

<http://www.engage.com/>



Engrade is a free, private, secure, and easy to use tool that allows teachers to create and manage an online grade book and calendar for each of the classes that they teach. As with all the other tools reviewed in this article, Engrade is completely web-based and so doesn't require you to download or install any software. Once you create an account, you can setup a grade book with your preferred settings. Teachers control the grading scale, assignment weights, and decide if grades will be calculated automatically by the system. In addition, Engrade includes an online calendar where you can post exam dates or due dates for homework assignments.

Course Management Systems

The features discussed above are all individual components of most commercial course management systems. Taken individually, or in combination, they can provide you with some of the core functionality of such a system. Of course, if you really want access to a full virtual learning environment, then you might want to take a look at a free, open source software package such as Moodle.

Moodle

<http://moodle.org/>



Moodle is a full-featured course management system that is available for download and use under a GNU Public License (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/gpl.html>). Basically, this means that although the software is copyrighted, you may still copy, use and/or modify the program provided that you offer your version to others and apply the same type of license to any derivative version you create.

Moodle offers all of the features discussed in this article and more. For example, Moodle offers a real-time chat module, the ability to design and set quizzes and tests, as well as a survey module. Moodle can be used to host a single-teacher site, or by a large institution with thousands of students and a multitude of courses. Of course, because of its complexity, there is a significant learning curve associated with using this program, so libraries and librarians will want to keep this in mind before choosing to go with this type of comprehensive solution.

Finding More Free Tools to Develop Your Own Toolkit

Obviously, the sites reviewed in this article represent only a sampling of the many free, online, open-source e-learning tools available. If these examples don't meet your needs, there is no need to worry. There are many other options available, and the easiest way to find them is via a simple web search using as search terms the category of tool you seek (e.g., “grade books”), along with the key terms “open source” or “free”.