

16 Technology Tools for Engaging Students in Higher Education

FEW THINGS ARE AS FRUSTRATING to teachers and students as disinterest. Creating interest and engaging students, however, is one of the most difficult things to do in a modern classroom. Students often perceive class material as irrelevant and teachers are discouraged by the ensuing disengagement.

Fortunately, technology can help bridge the gap between students and teachers. By managing, creating and sharing content with the help of technology, teachers can engage students in ways that students are familiar and comfortable with. This e-Booklet describes 16 technologies that are currently being used to manage, create and share content that is engaging students in collegiate classrooms across the world.

While there are countless tools available to instructors, we've selected applications proven to increase student engagement with minimal planning and training.

MANAGING CONTENT

Before diving into tons of new technology it is important to have a way to manage all of your course material including syllabi, assignments, tests, audio and video. Without a central hub for obtaining this information students will be easily confused and lose interest faster than they did before. The following four tools are great for managing your class.

1 Blackboard Learn

Blackboard Learn provides a comprehensive set of tools for course communication, document exchange, grade tracking, assessments, surveys and much more. These features allow instructors to take greater advantage of class time by deferring administrative duties to time spent outside of class. This can regularly save ten to twenty minutes a lecture. Additionally, Blackboard provides a wide variety of plug-ins that can enhance the functionality of Blackboard to fit the unique needs of your class. Unfortunately, Blackboard is cost prohibitive for individual instructors to purchase. If your school does not provide it for you this is probably not an option for your class.

2 Moodle

Like Blackboard, Moodle provides a comprehensive set of tools for course communication, document exchange, grade tracking, assessments, surveys and much more. Of course, Moodle's biggest strength is its free price tag. Moodle is modular as well, meaning you can use as little or as much of its academic suite as you want. Additionally, Moodle has a large community of developers, administrators, teachers and students that can provide support to your classroom. Moodle has many of the same features as Blackboard and supports other features such as blogs and wikis. Be careful though – if no one is providing dedicated support for Moodle you may be left out to dry.

3 Wikis

While wikis may not be as comprehensive as content management software (CMS) like Blackboard or Moodle, they still can provide much of the functionality that CMS provides. Wikis can be used to organize group projects, post class assignments, aggregate resources, facilitate peer reviews, answer frequently asked questions and publish newspapers or blogs. Wikis are living and breathing documents that can be edited by any number of people making them especially beneficial for instructors that desire a large amount of collaboration in their classroom. Additionally, wikis are available to educators for either free or low costs. PBworks.com and Wikispaces.com are popular sites for building full website wikis.

4 Blogs

Blogs are the least comprehensive of the tools listed here, but are the most readily available. Blogs also allow instructors to do many of the same things CMSs and wikis do. Blogs provide a place for sharing opinions and giving students a global voice which allows students to see the importance of writing and motivates them to take ownership of their own writing. Archiving also allows students to see how their thoughts have progressed over time. Teachers can use blogs to disseminate their syllabi, announcements and assignments. Blogging services are provided by WordPress, Blogger, and TypePad.

CREATING CONTENT

After obtaining a place to manage content it's time to start creating the content that will go on your course hub. In some cases this material is already created (like syllabi), but may need to be altered in some way. These six tools will help you create great content for your course.

5 Wiki Pages

As described before, wikis are a great place for creating content. Content can be edited collaboratively and previous versions can be archived. Additionally, wikis allow uploading of documents and linking to other valuable resources.

6 Blog Posts

The true power of a blog is in blog posts. Blog posts are the content placed on a blog and can be anything you, as an instructor, want them to be. When comments are allowed, the blog can become a place for additional content where students can share thoughts and ideas on the post and create an environment for thoughtful discussion.

7 Office Tools

Office tools are vital to creating a variety of different types of documents especially if a word processor isn't your only need. Most office suites provide a word processor, a spreadsheet, a presentation, and a database application. Being able to present content in the right format can greatly enhance the quality of the document. Large tables don't belong in a word processor and lots of text doesn't belong in a slide show. Microsoft's office suite is the current standard in document creation, but what many aren't aware of is the breadth of web based office tools available for collaborative documents. Both Google's Documents application and Zoho's office suite provide the same tools as Microsoft with the added benefit of being web based.

Because they are web based, Google Docs and Zoho provide an easy means for collaborating on documents that is not available with Microsoft. However, if your main concern is a comprehensive set of features then Microsoft Office Suite is tough to beat.

8 Whiteboards

Whiteboards are collaborative documents that can be created by any person and reused or edited by another person with access to the web. As with wikis, previous versions can be stored with archiving making it easy to reference earlier versions. Popular whiteboards include SMART Board, Ether Pad and Writeboard. Interactive documents allow for easy editing of student writing as well as making collaborative student documents easier. No more sending back and forth new versions of a document.

9 Podcasts

While written word is used most often to create content, in certain circumstances, it might make sense to use audio. With the prevalence of iPods and mp3 players it is now easier than ever to make and distribute audio to your students. One method for doing this is podcasts. Podcasts are simply published audio that allow education to become portable. Teachers are able to reach students outside of the classroom. You may consider having students listen to the assortment of podcasts already available on the web or creating your own for distribution. However, recording your lectures may not be the best

use of a podcast. Podcasts are best for presenting material that can be covered in about 20 minutes. Also, podcasts shouldn't be like lectures but more like a radio show - even if they are not. Podcasts should be planned, but not scripted. That last thing a student wants to hear is you reading a script. Also consider having students create podcasts. Lastly, if you plan on using music make sure to abide by copyright laws. Podcasts can be created using software like Audacity, Adobe Audition, or Garageband.

10 Video Podcasts

The video podcast is a video version of a podcast. Where podcasts are limited by audio, video podcasts include both audio and video, making them more versatile than the podcast. Video podcasts can be used for publishing your own lectures or having students view lectures of other content experts.

SHARING CONTENT

Once you have a method to manage and create content it is vital that you find outlets for sharing with your students and peers. While publishing the material to your course management software, wikis, or blogs is certainly appropriate, there are other methods that are available to help you reach a broader audience.

11 RSS

RSS which stands for Really Simple Syndication (formerly called Rich Site Summary) allows users to aggregate updates to websites across the web into one single feed reader. Using RSS on your blogs, wikis or websites will let students know when new content is available.

Additionally, by using a feed reader such as Google Reader, you can subscribe to any number of web feeds from your field to help you keep up to date on current education trends.

12 Social Bookmarking

Social bookmarking is another common tool for storing and organizing links to web pages. While bookmarking has been around for some time social bookmarking allows you to share the sites you find useful with your students. Additionally, with RSS feeds students can know when you have updated your bookmarks. Because there is much valuable information on the web, it is important for you to be able to find and store it so that your students can be able to see the material as well. Sites such as Delicious, Diigo and Furl are popular for social bookmarking.

13 SlideShare

Sites like SlideShare are invaluable for those trying to share slide presentations. By uploading your slides to SlideShare students can easily reference slides later for note taking or studying.

14 Social Networking

Social networking is another way to pass material around the web. Sites such as Ning allow you to create your own social networks, establishing a place for all of your students to collaborate and share information. While sites like Facebook and MySpace do function as social networks, it might be best to avoid them for your class because of the proliferation of distractions found on those sites.

15 Photo Sharing

Sites like Flickr and Picasa make it easy to upload and share photos. Photo sharing can be difficult for group projects and large organizations, so being able to put all your photos in one place is helpful.

16 Video Sharing

Sites like YouTube make it easy to create educational channels for your classroom where you can post any videos that you would like your students to see.

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