

Using Web 2.0 Tools to Balance Work, Life, and Term Papers

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INTRODUCTION

As a wife, employee, student, and friend, it is hard at times to find a balance between the various areas of my life. Since I teach college courses online and am also completing my doctorate online, I spend much of my time in front of a computer screen responding to e-mails, reading research articles, grading papers, and creating tools that can help my students and, in turn, manage my time better. Early in my online teaching

career I found myself spending large quantities of time answering the same questions over and over from students. "How do I attach a file to my discussion board post?" "How do I check my grades?" "How do I change the file type when saving a word document?" At first, I enthusiastically drafted step-by-step e-mails with screen shots that showed my students the answers to their questions. Eventually, I became burnt out and frustrated that I had to spend so much time trouble-shooting (what I thought) simple tasks my online students should have already known. My inbox was constantly full with unread and flagged messages and my voicemail overflowed with panicked messages from students expecting calls back. After two semesters of this stressful, hair-pulling, and exhausting experience I was ready to walk away from online teaching forever.

Fortunately I was scheduled to complete a graduate course that summer that delved deep into Web 2.0 tools and their role in the virtual teaching environment. It was during this course that I had my "aha" moment and emerged from the cacophony of discouragement in my head, to the plateau of efficiency and innovation. I realized that I should be working smarter, not harder—and that there were a myriad of Web 2.0 tools that could help me become more effective, more personal, and create a balance in my life.



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DEVELOPING AN ARSENAL OF "HOW-TO" FILES

The first area I researched was Web 2.0 tools that I could use to create "how to" files that could assist my students with their frequently asked questions. I wanted a tool that was user-friendly for both the instructor and the student. The solution—Jing (Tech Smith, 1995). The Jing Project is a free download that allows users to create short video clips (5 minutes or less) that captures the image on their computer screen, while recording any audio or narration. These short video clips could be shared instantly via web, e-mail, IM, Twitter, or even embedding the html code in the learning management system. Immediately I found the answer to the majority of my students' questions. I created Jings that gave an overview of the learning management system the college used, how students could change the file type when saving their documents, attaching files to the dropbox or their discussion board posts and even how to access their course materials. Now, instead of having to repeat myself over and over again, I just included the link to the appropriate Jing when responding to students. In turn, the students appreciated being able to see step by step how to solve their problem and also enjoyed hearing my voice direct them through the process. It not only reduced the number of frantic e-mails and phone calls I received, but also built a rapport with my students and helped close the transactional distance between us. Currently I include my Jings as part of my course set-up announcements. I also have a Jing that welcomes students to the class and provides an overview of each week.

CREATING A ONE-STOP SHOP

As I developed a variety of Jings, I wanted to find a way to put all of these video clips in one place for my students, instead of creating multiple announcements or uploading all the files to the docsharing

tab. To accomplish this goal, I used Glogster EDU (2007). Glogster EDU is an interactive virtual poster that can include multimedia elements, including text, audio, video, images, graphics, drawings, and data. My primary purpose was to create a Glog that had the title of each of my "how to" Jings, which was hyperlinked to the video file. By creating a Glog and putting all of the links to my "how to" arsenal, I only had to create one announcement on my course home page and embed the html code provided by Glogster. This created a one-stop shop for my students that were available during the duration of the course.

SCHEDULING ONLINE APPOINTMENTS

Even with the use of Jing and Glogster, there were still times when students needed to contact me to discuss personal situation that were not appropriate in the online forums. Instead of the inevitable phone tag, I wanted students to be able to make an appointment with me and also allow me to set consistent office hours when I would be available for phone calls. To accomplish this, I used Lattiss (2006)—a free online appointment scheduler. I would create open appointment times on my Lattiss calendar, embed the html code into my instructor page, and students could schedule themselves for a specific day and time for me to call them. The scheduler would ask for the student's name and phone number and then automatically generate an e-mail for both the student and instructor with the appointment details. This allowed me to manage my time by carving out time for phone calls and also let students know when I was available to speak with them privately.

FOSTERING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

I quickly learned that teaching in the virtual environment was very different than teaching in a brick and mortar school. Stu-

dents often felt disconnected and alone in their online courses and did not feel like they were part of a group. To help alleviate this feeling of solitude, I incorporated Voice Thread as a meet and greet during the first week and as a wrap-up at the end of the course. "Voice Thread is a collaborative, multimedia slide show that holds images, documents, and videos and allows people to navigate slides and leave comments in five ways—using voice (with a mic or telephone), text, audio file, or video (via a webcam)" (Voice Thread, 2007, p.1). Students could create a free account, upload a picture of themselves, and record their introduction. This allowed students to see real pictures of their classmates and foster a sense of community in a group of complete strangers. By putting a face with a name, it helped students see each other as people and not just names on a screen. This also created an environment that was not threatening, encouraged rich dialogue, and built relationships between students.

HOSTING SYNCHRONOUS WEB SESSIONS

During the early stages of my online teaching career, I would offer my students support via e-mail and pre-created web tools, but I felt that something was missing. One semester I decided to experiment and host an optional, weekly synchronous web session for any student that needed assistance. Initially I used the live web-conferencing tool available in the college' learning management system, but the audio was only one-way (my students could hear me, but I could not hear my students) and found it to be insufficient to meet my needs. Instead, I created an account with Dimdim and pay a nominal fee each month to host weekly webinars. Dimdim is a collaboration tool for online meetings, desktop sharing, training, webinars, and distance education (Dimdim, 2010). Once I sign in, I can schedule a recurring meeting that uses the same con-

ference call number each time (which I post for students). Students then follow the webinar link to enter the meeting room and can either call in using the conference call number or use their computer microphone to speak. Students know that I will be online at a set time each week to help them and it is an "open door" policy. Students are not obligated to come and do not have to stay during the entire hour, but they know I am available. Students have told me this weekly session makes them feel safe, knowing I will be available consistently in case they have a pressing issue.

ENCOURAGING COMMUNICATION

In my online courses students know they can reach me in a variety of ways—posting on a discussion board, via e-mail, scheduling an appointment, or during my weekly web sessions. I want my students to feel they can communicate with me in a non-threatening way. I do not want my students to be intimidated to approach me for help or if they are struggling with personal issues that will affect their schoolwork. To accomplish this, I also post my Skype phone number and my Skype ID (Skype, 2010). When I am working, I am typically signed into my Skype account and show myself as available. If a student has a pressing issue that needs immediate attention, I encourage them to call me or instant message me through Skype. Very rarely will I have a student abuse this access, but it is just another way that I make myself available to my students. The majority will send an e-mail rather than making a phone call, but those who do contact me through Skype use the instant message feature.

As I progress through my online teaching career, I am sure the field of virtual education with change dramatically. With those changes, I want to ensure I achieve a sense of balance between my professional and personal life. As an online educator, I do not have the privilege of holding typi-

cal working hours, but I can contain my professional obligations to times that meet my students' and my family's needs. Using Web 2.0 tools to work smarter has allowed me to find a balance that was missing when I entered the field of virtual education.

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