

Assessment Tools for the Online Classroom

EDUC 762 Collaborative Midterm

Blake Greisinger, Lisa Fitzgerald, and Sheri Perez

In their book *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace*, Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt discuss one of the most common concerns when it comes to teaching online: Is “online learning . . . as effective as the face-to-face classroom in achieving learning outcomes” (18). Far too often, students equate online classes with correspondence courses in which they work independently through bundles of work, but online courses have the unique ability to serve students so that they can obtain a rich learning experience. Effective online courses strike a strong balance between content learning and personalized learning, and the assessments used should also be varied. Certainly, information is important, but utilizing a variety of tools to present that material and assess student understanding can be the mechanism that grabs and maintains students’ interest. Hence, “Course assessment is important because it has a strong impact on learning and is an indicator of the quality of learning occurring in a class” (Arend 3), and it is this notion exactly that pushes us as instructors not just to provide one type of assessment, but to focus on using meaningful tools to measure students’ mastery of the learning outcomes. Thus, the creation of an assessment toolbox becomes invaluable in reaching a wide variety of students through multiple measures. Here, we examine three electronic assessment tools—Google Apps, Pathbrite, and Twitter—that can help to provide meaningful approaches to engage and assess students.

A High Level Overview of Google Apps for Education by Blake Greisinger

Introduction

Google Apps for Education is a suite of online tools that organizations (mainly schools) can utilize for the creation, viewing, sharing, and organization of content.

Uses and Benefits of Google Apps for Education

Google Apps for Education can be used in either a fully online or blended method of education. With it you can create documents (Google Docs), Spreadsheets (Google Sheets), and Presentations (Google Slides) amongst others, and then distribute them online via the Google Classroom website. The main benefit for Google Apps for Education is its “one stop for everything” nature. Once students or teachers are logged in and use it, everything works and is compatible, as long as you stay within the Google “sandbox.” As a teacher, I like it because I create a document as normal, and then select what classes I want to assign it to, and each student gets his/her own copy of that document, just as if I had physically photocopied it. Students can add, edit, and hand in the document, and I get direct access to it for evaluation, timeliness, and commenting on their work.

Weaknesses and Challenges of Google Apps for Education

Like many things, Google Apps for Education has two sides to its coin: on the one hand, everything is in an online contained environment, which works really well. On the other, everything is in a contained online environment, in which outside applications and systems don't work well. Additionally, students (and teachers) must be online to use it. This constraint presents problems, such as difficulty implementing 3rd party software, which might be industry standard. You can certainly upload, and present all kinds of documents (Word, PowerPoint, Excel, etc.) but much of the benefit of the Google platform is lost, such as the ability to edit and hand back work through Google Classroom. This downside can be a big issue if part of your mission is teaching students how to use industry standard software. The other big issue is that you must be online at all times to use it, even if you are just editing a document. This means that you must make sure that you and your students have reliable internet access all the time, not just when it is time to interact with the class.

Application of Google Apps for Education in the Blended Electronics Classroom.

Learning Objective: Students will learn how to implement coding to fade an LED via input from the potentiometer.

Success Criteria: Students will have a complete, working circuit. Students will have completed the attached questions. Students will have handed in their Google Doc.

1) As the teacher I have created a Google Doc, which explains the circuit that the students will need to build. The document contains an introduction, a circuit diagram, and some code that students can use as a basis for their program, and some questions that students will have to answer. Here is the link for the actual assignment as I present it to my class:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1S2CNzldrOca8w70cNjMTcPNCaNb3m5qcsj bDqKk69r4/edit?usp=sharing>

2) Students will log on to Google Classroom and view the classroom “stream,” which looks and acts like the Facebook “wall” with the most recent items on top and past assignments and announcements underneath.

3) Students click on the current assignment, and each student has his/her own copy of the document that I have created.

4) Students read the document, complete the circuit and get it signed off by me (on a real world piece of paper). If this were a totally online course the student could make a short video of the circuit and upload it to YouTube. Since Google owns YouTube, their videos also play well in Google Apps for Education.

5) The students complete the questions by typing their responses directly on to the document. This document allows for unlimited answer space, the ability to drop in pictures, and allows for differentiation and accommodation for those students who have difficulty writing with traditional pencil and paper.

6) The student clicks the “turn in” button on the upper left hand of the screen, and the assignment goes to my inbox in my Google Classroom screen. At a glance, I can see who has turned it in and whether it is on time or not. In addition, I can click on the document for evaluation, commenting, and grading. The results are immediately available to the student in real time.

The ability to utilize Google Classroom both in my physical classroom and wherever I happen to have the internet has proved to be really powerful. Students are enjoying the ability to have access to their work and feedback right away and always have it organized and searchable. I have had a lot of positive feedback on its implementation in my classroom. Google also offers a variety of apps (including Classroom,) which allows access and full functionality from mobile devices.

A look at Pathbrite by Lisa Fitzgerald

Introduction

Pathbrite is an electronic portfolio program that allows users to store and show authentic evidence of the work they have produced. Anything from schoolwork to resumes and projects can be housed and presented on Pathbrite. Users even have the ability to add images, audio, and video to their work, so addressing all types of learning styles is a great component of Pathbrite.

Uses and Benefits of Pathbrite

Pathbrite is a very friendly site, particularly for use within an educational context. Instructors can work with Pathbrite similarly to a learning management system (LMS), where courses can be created, and instructors can monitor students' work/artifacts. Unlimited storage is available through the site, and helpful portfolio templates are provided so that students can see examples of completed work. Likewise, creative students can run wild with the options provided and are only limited by their imagination. Aside from being able to add Word, Google Docs and PDF documents to portfolios, users can also connect viewers to blogs, YouTube videos, resumes, or any other reference material they would like. Privacy is also well considered, as users have the option of making their portfolio available to the public or maintaining privacy by sharing their url directly with chosen individuals.

Weaknesses and Challenges of Pathbrite

Although Pathbrite can be used effectively in a classroom situation without spending any money, there are some fancy bells and whistles that only come to those who pay. Pathbrite is free for instructors, but students are charged a \$10 yearly fee to access "instructor classes"; the \$10 fee is applied to all courses the students access. At this level, instructors can add rubrics to their assessments of students' work, along with their comments. Also, Pathbrite could also be overwhelming for students who aren't familiar with technology. I have found that the site does not seem to be all that intuitive in that creating the portfolio can be challenging. For example, trying to add pictures and text on the same page was a major challenge, one that I am still trying to work through.

Application of Pathbrite in the Online Composition Classroom

Learning Objective: Students will show the ability to apply the steps of the writing process to an assignment and evaluate and reflect on their work through their Pathbrite e-portfolio with at least a proficient score on the provided rubric.

1) Students will first be introduced to the writing process, and they will practice the techniques in their e-portfolios.

2) Prewriting—The first step of the writing process (prewriting) will ask students to use a number of strategies to generate ideas for their essays. Strategies, such as brainstorming, listing, and clustering will be offered. Students will be given the opportunity to use mind map technology to add to their portfolio if they choose, but they will be encouraged to try out many options to determine the most meaningful to them.

3) Writing—Students begin to narrow their focus from the prewriting they have generated and decide upon a focus/tentative thesis. An outline or other organizational map can be used to move toward the first draft. Focus on organization, content, and structure is the emphasis here. Mechanics takes a backseat at this stage of the process.

4) Revising—In the revision process, students focus on higher level writing skills, such as argument, focus, support, and voice. There is an emphasis on looking at the essay with a very critical eye and re-visioning what can make it stronger.

5) Editing—In the editing process, students focus on spelling, grammar, punctuation, and word choice. The essay is seen as much more of a product at this point, and the student is making his/her final touches.

6) Publishing—Students publish their essays to their e-portfolios as the final product of a meaningful process.

7) Reflection—Students reflect on what did and did not work for them in this process and make a plan for how they will approach the next assignment.

The above example is yet one approach to using Pathbrite in the classroom. What is even more exciting than the options are the results: According to “Principles and Practices in Electronic Portfolios,” the Conference on College Composition and Communication has found that e-portfolios can be used to enforce learning outcomes, create digital identities, provide students with the opportunity to write for authentic audiences, write across the curriculum, and promote life-long learning (CCCC). E-portfolios encourage students to engage in the writing process, something that many of them are unfamiliar with. They can do so in a safe and nurturing environment—one in which they can receive feedback and support. The reflection that students engage in will help them to understand the significance that working through an assignment can have, and the hope is that they will transfer this awareness to all parts of their learning. The following link is a sample portfolio that I created that gives the stages of the writing process. (The above plan would have students work through each stage in their portfolios.)

<https://pathbrite.com/u416381859/NOiZ>

A Look at Twitter in the Classroom by Sheri Perez

Introduction

Twitter is a social networking device for the classroom that can be used to build a learning community around course content. The 140-character limit for each message or tweet requires questions and answers to be short and allows learning to continue outside of a traditional learning management system.

Uses and Benefits of Twitter

Ultimately, Twitter is a platform that allows teachers to connect their learning objectives to the real world, “expanding the boundaries of learning” (November). Students that have an account can quickly post questions or respond to messages from their phones. Those students that are hesitant about joining Twitter and establishing an account can still read the messages until they become comfortable with the platform, an advantage for older students in higher education. Recently, Twitter introduced a new survey tool that allows for anonymous voting, adding another option within this platform for simple assessments. Jeff Dunn provides a wonderful article on the ins and outs of how to begin using Twitter and then applies it to the role of an educator. In order to make the most of Twitter in your course, you should Tweet regularly (one to five times a day), share what you are reading and watching in your content area, and ask your students questions. The goal is to create a community in your course and to encourage students to work together.

Weaknesses and Challenges of Twitter

If Twitter participation is optional, which may be likely in some courses, participation could be uneven or nonexistent from students. Twitter reports that over a 1/3 of their registered users don't tweet, which means some students may follow the class account but may never want to voluntarily participate. In spite of this drawback, Samantha Miller provides many ideas for using Twitter that would still be beneficial to more passive followers, including reminding students about upcoming due dates, posting changes to the syllabus, and using Twitter as a forum for students to ask questions during and after lectures. Simply reading the questions and answers on the Twitter feed can be a valuable learning experience for students too shy to participate in social media. The biggest drawback to Twitter is requiring students to register for an account and then participate in the course account, especially if some students are resistant to social media, due to concerns about privacy. In addition, the 140-character limit in each tweet requires any assessment exercises to remain very simple, so students can respond in a few words. Complex topics would need to be avoided and addressed in other assessment vehicles.

Application of Twitter in an Online Economics Class

Learning Objective: Explain the difference between a change in demand and a change in the quantity demanded.

Tweet posted by instructor: Diabetes experts tell G20 to tax sugar to save lives. Is the goal to change the demand or the quantity demanded for sugar? Explain your reasoning . . . in 140 characters or less.

After covering demand in class through notes, videos, and homework assignments, students can follow the link to either read an article or watch a news report on a suggested tax on sugar. Reflecting back to the content covered in the course, students should be able to identify this example as a change in the quantity demanded of sugar since the purpose of the tax is to increase the price of sugar. If students start responding with the wrong answer, then additional tweets focusing on the price of sugar by the instructor could prod them towards a better understanding of this concept.

Conclusion

The key to successful assessment seems to be the use of multiple methods and effective and timely instructor feedback. The assessment tools and practices that we have discussed help to assess students' understanding by using formative and summative approaches. Although there are numerous tools for assessing students, instructors should also remember the importance of connecting assignments to the desired learning outcomes. Rather than treating students as empty receptacles ready to be filled with the knowledge of their professors, "Instructors can instead maximize student interest and excitement by using a bottom-up approach that involves assessing students' needs, tailoring the course experience, and using teaching techniques that purposefully heighten students' engagement" (Meyers). Creating and using an assessment toolbox will serve instructors in achieving the learning outcomes desired.

Works Cited

- Arend, Bridget D. "Course Assessment Practices and Student Learning Strategies in Online Courses." *Course Assessment Practices and Student Learning Strategies in Online Courses* (2006): 3-18. Web. 11 Nov. 2015.
- CCCC Taskforce on Best Practices in Electronic Portfolios. "Principles and Practices in Electronic Portfolios." *NCTE Comprehensive News*. NCTE, Mar. 2015. Web. 12 Nov. 2015.
- Dunn, Jeff. "100 Ways to Use Twitter in Education, By Degree of Difficulty." Edudemic, April 25, 2012. <http://www.edudemic.com/100-ways-to-use->

twitter-in-education-by-degree-of-difficulty/.

Miller, Samantha. "50 Ways to Use Twitter in the Classroom." TeachHub.com.
<http://www.teachhub.com/50-ways-use-twitter-classroom>.

Meyers, Steven A. "Three Strategies for Creating Meaningful Learning Experiences."
Faculty Focus. Magna Publications, 24 Feb. 2014. Web. 12 Nov. 2015.

November, Alan and Brian Mull. "How Twitter Can Be Used as a
Powerful Educational Tool." October 18, 2012.
<http://novemberlearning.com/educational-resources-for-educators/teaching-and-learning-articles/how-twitter-can-be-used-as-a-powerful-educational-tool/>.

Palloff, Rena M. and Keith Pratt. "Defining and Redefining Community." *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace*. 21-32. PDF.