

Choosing the technology that works for YOU!

Darren Elliott, JALT 2009, 21st November

The object of this presentation is to provide a checklist for anyone considering the implementation of web-based technology for education.

A brief, and impossible, taxonomy

Social Networking Tools	Wikis	Blogs	Virtual Learning Environments
Sites which enable participants to link to other members in virtual communities and share information, media and links. <i>Facebook, Mixi, Ning, delicious, diigo.</i>	Webpages which can be manipulated and edited by all the members of a predetermined group. <i>Wikipedia, Glogster.</i>	Ongoing self-published journals, ordered chronologically. <i>Wordpress, blogger, tumblr, twitter.</i>	Also known as course management systems. Often institutionally hosted and targeted directly at education. <i>Moodle, Blackboard.</i>

In fact, most tools you will come across will take elements from each of these categories. Think about well-known sites like youtube. It can be used to host video blogs, but it can be used as a social networking site. Many applications now link to one another, too, which can add to the confusion.

But don't panic!

Purpose

The first thing you have to decide is why you want to use technology. Three things I think it does particularly well are these.

Delivery - A place to host or gather files or media for the students to download.

Collaboration - A shared space for students to work together.

Tracking - An area for students to record their progress. An assessment tool.

You may want to focus on just one, or combine all three. Each aspect in turn raises it's own questions. What kind of media are you hoping to deliver? Do students need to download it, or just view it?

Beyond that, you need goals. Are you focused on skills, language or something less-conveniently measurable like learner autonomy? Traditionalists, if there is such a thing amongst technophiles, might say that you should decide your answers to these questions before you touch a keyboard. I'm not so sure - sometimes a new gadget or web application inspires ideas that you hadn't previously considered. Nonetheless, 'purpose' is something you should never, ever lose sight of.

The Checklist

accessibility	<p>Do you need a password to access the site? Do you need to log in every time you access the site? What kind of internet access does your institution allow? What are the opening hours of your institutional computer rooms? Are students able to access institutional servers off “campus”? Is the equipment powerful enough to do what you want to do? Even if there are thirty students online simultaneously?</p>
mobility	<p>Is the material accessible from a mobile telephone? How much of it? Can students add or edit material by mobile phone?</p>
security	<p>Are the students going to upload or create their own work? Is the site searchable on search engines, or can it be hidden? Can anonymity be protected? How much information does a student need to give in order to register with or use the site? Are students comfortable with their work being published? Are you sure? Are the students aware of net security issues? Do the students have good security software at home? Is there a danger that your project could be damaged by viruses?</p>
navigation	<p>Is it easy to get from one place to another? Do hyperlinks pop up in new windows? Is the colour scheme readable? Is it well designed, for both aesthetics and utility? Does the interface change depending on the user (e.g. does it automatically set language based on the user’s ISP?)</p>
usability	<p>Will the students require a demonstration? Is it simple to use, even for those who generally lack confidence or experience with computers? Is it easy to back up and save work, and are previous versions retained?</p>
management	<p>Will you be managing alone, or with others? How will you delegate management tasks? Who will have access to which parts of the tool? Will students be able to edit? Where will your site be hosted (if necessary)?</p>
cost	<p>Can you find a free version? Can you get an educators discount? If you pay a subscription, is your school willing to commit long-term? Will there be any other expenses? (equipment etc)</p>
stability	<p>Is the site still at a beta testing stage? Does it crash or freeze often? Does it work in the same way on different browsers, computers or networks? Does the look of the site change frequently? Are features and functions often added or removed?</p>
support	<p>Does your school have technical support staff? Are they aware of your project, and willing to help? Does the site have support? How does it operate? Is there a lot of other unofficial support available from the web, colleagues, etc?</p>

Where to look?

Here are a few sites and applications that you might want to look at.

Name	URL	Description
wordpress	http://wordpress.org/	professional looking blogging platform
blogger	https://www.blogger.com/	popular free blogging platform, simple
tumblr	http://www.tumblr.com/	micro-blogging, very minimal
moodle	http://moodle.org/	complete course management system, free and open source
voicethread	http://voicethread.com/	annotated presentations
xtranormal	http://www.xtranormal.com/	text to animated, voiced movies
google docs	https://www.google.com/	share and edit 'office' style documents
glogster	http://www.glogster.com/	make multimedia poster presentations
wikispaces	http://www.wikispaces.com/	wiki
ning	http://www.ning.com/	closed, social multimedia platform
edmodo	http://www.edmodo.com/	social platform / micro blog
voxopop	http://www.voxopop.com/	audio message boards

But it's even better if you know where to find stuff for yourself..... looking around ning, wordpress and blogger you will probably come across a number of teaching blogs and communities. Build your own Personal Learning Network and off you go!

twitter

Everyone thinks it's about what celebrities had for breakfast, but it's not. Join up and follow me at @livesofteachers . Personally, I'm not especially interesting. But there is a constant flow of ideas, links and conversation which can at times be a bit overwhelming. There is a growing community of educators on twitter who will often help you out.

social bookmarking

There are two sites in particular, delicious and diigo, which you can use to carry your bookmarks wherever you go... more importantly, though, you can search others bookmarks by tags and categories and connect to like-minded people.

Yahoo! Groups

email lists almost seem quaint in 2009, but there are some excellent groups out there. I recommend the webheads at <http://bit.ly/1fLVmy> to start off with.

This handout will be up, with an audio/video of the slideshow, at www.livesofteachers.com. Come and let me know how you get on!