

Technologies for Teaching Writing

OIT Academic Computing – University of Massachusetts Amherst

OIT Academic Computing offers workshops on the following tools that can be used in the teaching or assessment of writing. These workshop topics would be very easy for us to incorporate into a presentation or program for faculty.

Tools that encourage writing

The more students write, and read other's writing, the more they learn about writing. These tools provide opportunities for students to write and read each other's work outside of class. The familiar form of these tools means that students often don't even notice that they are writing:

SPARK's "Discussion" Tool - written exchange of ideas

The instructor posts a topic or a leading question and each student responds (to the initial post or to other posts). The written exchanges in online "discussions" are like short response papers. If the expectations are properly outlined ahead of time, students will not only learn how to present their positions using clear, concise writing, but they will also learn to critique other positions clearly and constructively.

UMass Blogs - personal writing space

Everyone with an OIT account can create a blog. Students can use these individualized blogs to create an easily updated Web site where they can post their writing. It may take the form of a journal, portfolio, or even a research log where they gather ideas and resources. The Comments feature of the blog site can be used for providing feedback on individual posts.

Digital Storytelling - focus on listening to your words

The act of writing a script for a short video, narrated slideshow, or audio podcast not only requires students to trim and refine their writing, but it also requires them to listen to what they wrote repeatedly. Faculty who have done digital storytelling projects with us report that the writing element has ended up being more important than they or their students expected.

Tools that facilitate collaborative writing

UDrive - sharing files

The simplest way for faculty and students to trade files (going over quota on e-mail) is to use a shared folder on UDrive. Once a shared folder is created, collaborators don't need to send attachments, just links to the files. This allows collaborators to share whatever file format is most useful (such as Microsoft Word files with "tracking changes" enabled). UDrive also has features that allow for version control and tracking who has accessed a file.

GoogleDocs - live online collaboration

This online word processor allows multiple people to edit a document at the same time through a browser. The software keeps track of who has accessed the document and what changes they've made. A document can also be exported as a MS Word file, PDF, or one of various other file formats. (Note: Google Docs is not officially supported by the OIT Help Desk)

PBWiki - collaborative web site creation

If the goal is to create a publicly accessible Web site, wikis (such as PBwiki) allow a group of people to work together to build a site. Wiki tools allow people in the group to edit text, add pages, and even discuss what is being written in a “discussion” area behind the scenes. The history of changes is tracked so that it is easy to see who made what change, when, and even revert pages back to earlier versions. (Note: PBWiki is not officially supported by the OIT Help Desk)

Tools that facilitate assessment of writing**SPARK’s Assignment tool - facilitating collection and feedback**

The assignment tool in SPARK collects and tracks files that students submit for an assignment. The tool keeps track of deadlines, provides a way to send comments back to the student, and enables graders to enter grades directly into the SPARK grade book. Grading forms can be associated with assignments to provide a rubric for graders (or students) to provide consistent assessment of papers.

TurnItIn - checking originality and citations

Either as a standalone program or incorporated into the SPARK assignment tool, TurnItIn provides automatic plagiarism checking and citation evaluation. The service compares digital files to a database of documents available on the Web and provides an evaluation of the original text in the document. Not only does TurnItIn detect copies, but also evaluates cases where citation has been done incorrectly.

Resources & Further Reading:**Technology Tools to Support Student Writing**

Teaching Effectiveness Program, University of Oregon.

<http://www.uoregon.edu/~tep/technology/writing/writing.html>

Collaborative Writing Tools And Technology: A Mini-Guide (March 1, 2007)

Kolabora – Blog

http://www.kolabora.com/news/2007/03/01/collaborative_writing_tools_and_technology.htm

Assistive Technology Tools for Writing

Great Schools – Site

<http://www.greatschools.net/cgi-bin/showarticle/3084>

An Interface of One’s Own (Writer-friendly alternatives to MS Word)

Virginia Heffernan - New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/magazine/06wwln-medium-t.html>