

Time to go Google? Google Apps for Education

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Just over a year ago, Stacey Mosher wrote an article in this column on Google Docs (CAT-net December 2010), giving a great introduction to what Google Docs offers and how it could be used to great advantage in your classroom. But as he mentioned, Google Docs is only one component of what is offered as a full suite of integrated products called 'Google Apps for Education.' While this has been offered in Canada since 2006 when Lakehead University was the first to adopt it, the take up has been much slower than it was in the U.S.. One main reason for this was concerns over privacy and the 'Patriot Act', with Lakehead University even facing a court case brought by its faculty over this issue. The concern was that information was stored on servers outside of the country where foreign agencies had the potential to access or even confiscate the data. The University of Alberta spent almost a year exploring this issue and finally concluded that the concerns were unfounded. Since then, the adoption of Google Apps for Education in Canada has started to match the adoption rates seen previously in the U.S. About a year ago, Canadian University College started a pilot of this service which led us to adopt it campus wide in May, with Parkview Adventist Academy following in July, 2011.

The real heart of the Google Apps for Education suite is Gmail, and we will look at this in more detail shortly. Some of the other components are: Google Docs, the Microsoft Office-like suite with a word processor, spreadsheet, presentation program, drawings, forms (which can be used for on-line polls and questionnaires) and just recently, a database component; an enterprise class calendaring system; chat; web sites; picture and video sharing; blogs; groups-. And the offerings are continuing to increase. Pearson Education recently announced a Learning Management System (Open Class) they are providing free of charge which is integrated into the Google Apps for Education offering. I think that this could likely be the topic of a future article. Other third party providers such as ReadWriteWeb and BrainPop provide seamless integration with the list growing almost daily.

One of the compelling reasons to participate in this service is that it is free. Yes, there are different degrees of 'free' (free puppies vs. free candy?) but the fact is that at least for now, there is no cost for signing up and using this service. Google also makes the promise that no advertising will be displayed to your students. They do reserve the right to display advertising to non-registered students (alumni) if you choose to leave their accounts active after they leave your school. Another important distinction is that it is 'cloud based'. This means that you have access to any of the components whenever you have Internet access, from your PC, MAC, or mobile device. (GMail and Google Docs are also currently available in off-line mode so that you can work on things even without Internet connection.) This also means that additions, enhancements and fixes to the system are automatically delivered in real time with no need to maintain servers on your end or worry about updates and related downtime.

One of the major factors in CUC's switch to GMail was that a large portion of our students were used to the product (many already had personal GMail accounts) and were more likely to use it than our previous email offering. These personal accounts can be linked to their CUC Gmail account so that they can now access all their messages from one account. This has led to much greater use of our campus email system.

There are several ways in which you can manage the individual accounts within the system. For small schools, you may just want to use the default management utilities to manually create and manage accounts. Larger schools may choose to synchronize with their Active Directory, LDAP directory, or various other custom methods. The Groups component allows you to create email groupings that could be classes, grades, organizations, or any grouping for which you may want to provide one email address to be delivered to multiple accounts. These can be unmoderated (allowing any user to send to them) or moderated (only allowing certain people to send or approve sent messages) Since Google is at heart a search company, you can be assured that finding the message that you want in your email account is as good as it gets. The overall speed of using an off-site email system was something that we measured closely in our pilot, but were pleasantly surprised that even with all but the largest of attached files, access time was very acceptable, and mostly no different to our previous on-site system. A very effective SPAM and virus filtering is included with the standard service. Since switching, we have had fewer concerns about unwanted messages being received and have spent much less time in assisting users with finding missing messages (those that might have ended up in the SPAM folder). Since there are now thousands of schools that are using the Google offering, support for those situations where you need it is very likely going to be easy to find. If you can't find it yourself, you can always reach out to CUC staff, or as a last resort, to companies that provide assistance and implementation tools as well.

Another compelling reason for our switch was the storage space provided. Currently, 25 GB of storage is available to each GMail account. Unlimited space is available for any Google Docs generated file, while there is a 1 GB space limit for files that do not convert to the Google Docs format (more space can be purchased). When you consider that, for our campus, this equates to 18 Terrabytes of data, the cost of maintaining that amount of data on-site would be quite significant.

Finally, another feature that is worth mentioning is Google+, Google's attempt to provide a social networking experience similar to FaceBook While Google+ was first available to the general public, it is now included with Google Apps for Education which means that you can have some control over the interactions that are available to provide that 'safe' environment in which to provide learning experiences. Currently, Google+ does require the user to be at least 18 years of age, but Google intends to lower this age limit as it adapts this service for K-12 schools. The feature I find most intriguing in Google+ is their Google Hangouts that provides the ability

to have synchronous video conversations with up to 10 users. This could be used for distance ed. offerings, classroom projects, after school study sessions etc.

Free, safe, familiar, collaborative, convenient, mobile. Put these all together and you can see why Google Apps for Education is being adopted by individual schools and by whole state-wide systems. Give it a good look; I think you will find the biggest obstacle is finding time to think about how many ways its adoption can improve your classroom.

Additional Information:

Google Apps for Education main page: <http://www.google.com/apps/intl/en/edu/>

University Of Alberta Google Docs information: <http://www.vpit.ualberta.ca/email/>

Lakehead University Law Suite Outcome: <http://chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/arbitrator-rules-that-google-e-mail-system-does-not-violate-faculty-agreement-at-canadian-campus-2/7206>

Pearson's OpenClass: <http://www.joinopenclass.com/open/view/t1>

Google+ & K-12: <http://thejournal.com/articles/2011/08/24/google-may-open-social-networking-for-some-k12-schools.aspx>

Educational products providing integration with Google Apps:

<http://www.google.com/enterprise/marketplace/search?categoryId=25&orderBy=rating>