

THE DIGITAL TOOLBOX

AN INTRODUCTORY GUIDE TO COLLABORATION TECHNOLOGY

By Anthony Armstrong

The growing acceptance of collaboration as a necessity in high-quality learning has fueled the rapid growth of online tools to better support educators. In *Meet the Promise of Content Standards: Tapping Technology to Enhance Professional Learning* (2013), Joellen Killion examines this “explosion of web-based tools (that) promote and support social interaction, constructivism, and connectivism as primary learning theories” and offers tips and resources for finding success in adopting collaborative technology.

In the report, Killion shares five purposes for collaboration among learners: Co-construct knowledge, share experiences, reflect on practice, seek feedback, and contribute to the learning of others. Fortunately, most of the collaborative tools available allow users to perform some of these functions at various levels. However, determining which tools or services best support a specific professional learning system can be complex and frustrating — especially since the number and type of features each service offers can vary a great deal.

Technological tools require an investment of time and energy to properly explore and evaluate. Unfortunately, the num-

ber of collaboration tools that have appeared in recent years makes it almost impossible to devote resources to reviewing all of them. To help navigate this dizzying collection of online services, it may help to group them into three manageable categories: services that offer a primary purpose tool, services that offer a suite (or collection) of tools, and those that offer a comprehensive system of support specifically for professional learning.

The guide on pp. 28-31 is meant as a cursory introduction to some of the collaborative products and features available and is not meant to be a comprehensive collection.

It is important to remember that the various types of collaboration technology are simply tools that facilitate a small part





of a complete professional learning system and cannot actually replace the learning on their own.

An axiom common in technology circles is, “Do not let the technology get in the way of the learning.” Killion advises districts considering the adoption of collaborative tools to make sure that the selected tools integrate into a well-planned professional learning system.

“When dropped without full integration into a comprehensive plan, technology has the potential to fragment focus, distract learners, and waste resources,” said Killion. “Implementing technology as a part of a comprehensive professional learning system requires thoughtful decision making and deliberate ac-

tions at all stages — selection, implementation, and evaluation” (Killion, 2013, p. 26).

REFERENCE

Killion, J. (2013). *Meet the promise of content standards: Tapping technology to enhance professional learning.* Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.

•
Anthony Armstrong (anthony.armstrong@learningforward.org) is Learning Forward’s publications editor. ■



PRIMARY PURPOSE TOOLS FOR GENERAL USE

Services that offer a primary purpose tool, such as video sharing, may offer secondary features or services as a complement, but the main focus is on the original tool or intention. For example, YouTube is a video-sharing tool that also allows users to engage in discussions via comment threads. However, the primary purpose for YouTube is video sharing. The discussions are a secondary feature.

Eric Sheninger, in his keynote presentation at Learning Forward’s

2012 Annual Conference in Boston last December, noted that using readily available social media tools can help educators create a professional learning network and overcome resource limitations. “Social media is a dynamic resource that allows us to get involved, discuss, and create,” said Sheninger. “I harness and leverage social media tools to connect myself to smart people who give me ideas, knowledge, and strategies to do what I do better.

“When you harness the power of

free social media,” Sheninger said, “you are put in the center of your learning, and you form a professional learning network. ... It’s about sharing, getting resources, support, informal learning, self-directed learning, and acquiring knowledge. When you put it all together and find different tools that function in different ways, you create portfolios, resource libraries, and modes to communicate.”

PRIMARY PURPOSE TOOLS FOR GENERAL USE

Tool	Description	Example
Blogs, microblogs	Create and save discussion threads about one focused topic at a time. Microblogs share brief statements and links, and join conversations around one or more specific topics.	Blogger WordPress Tumblr Facebook Google+ Twitter
Document distribution	Share specific documents, whether the content is proprietary or from a third party. Use these tools to share content with a wide variety of audiences, including the public.	LiveBinders Scribd Google Drive Dropbox
File sharing	File sharing provides multiple people access to a central location of resources or files. This is different from document distribution in that file sharing allows sharing and editing of files within a central resource, whereas document distribution is focused on presenting one file at a time, without editing capabilities. Some services allow for multiple people to modify a file simultaneously for real-time collaboration.	Windows Skydrive Google Drive
Social bookmarking tool	Social bookmarking allows Internet users to share content and websites they find on the Internet. Users can build collections of content-focused resources, such as a list of favorite Common Core resources.	Delicious Diigo Evernote Scoop.it
Video-sharing site	While these sites allow for commenting and discussion threads for uploaded videos, they can be cumbersome and limited and are usually best for one-way sharing.	Vimeo YouTube
Web conferencing, presentation sharing, screen sharing	Numerous services facilitate sharing presentations or sharing computer screens. Most offer voice sharing through the computer, telephone conferencing, and chat functions.	Adobe Connect SlideShare WebEx Join.me Google+



PRIMARY PURPOSE TOOLS FOR EDUCATORS

Not all primary purpose tools are for the general public. Many have been created specifically for educator professional learning. Jennifer Wolf, a 6th-grade math teacher at Stewart Middle School in the Hillsborough County School District in Tampa, Fla., uses MyLivePD for one-on-one consultations to help her with classroom practices. “I like MyLivePD because it

offers personalized coaching on my time,” said Wolf. “If I have a question about teaching, I can go online and get connected to a coach in two to three minutes.”

Wolf sees clear benefits in being able to collaborate with a live expert on demand. “Before we started using MyLivePD, if I wanted to learn about something, I would have to search

online, figure out what I needed to know, and then search for where to learn it or find someone who would be willing to spend an hour with me after work to teach it to me. Now I get information that addresses my personal needs from a live expert who can sit and work with me for an hour if I need it, at a time I choose.”

PRIMARY PURPOSE TOOLS FOR EDUCATORS

Tool	Description	Example
Educational blogs	Education-only blogs designed for student and teacher use.	Edublogs
Video	Videos of quality teaching and supporting materials to use for free.	Success at the Core
	Cameras and software to create videos with sophisticated commentary and sharing.	thereNow
	Watch video content created by Teacher Channel and engage in discussions through comment threads and a new Q-and-A feature.	Teaching Channel
Live consultations	Live one-to-one consultation for teachers about classroom practice.	MyLivePD
	Live one-to-one consultation for professional learning coaches.	Coaches Connect
Discussion threads	Discussion groups with file sharing and event calendars.	Literacy Information and Communication System
Social network	Education-only social network that includes pages for specific groups with file sharing, quizzes, and polls. Was originally designed for classroom use, but now offers a professional development focus.	Edmodo for PD



SUITE OF TOOLS

Software and services in this category offer multiple tools that work together. Sometimes these tools are

intended for one specific purpose, such as course creation, and sometimes they are suites of tools that are adaptable to

a broad range of applications, such as project management tools that can be used for a variety of project types.

SUITES OF TOOLS		
Tool	Description	Example
Project management	Manage any type of project online. Can include various types of communication tools, a calendar, file sharing, milestones, and time tracking. Many of these services offer phone apps to meet consumers' mobile needs.	Basecamp TeamworkPM OneDesk Clarizen AtTask
Office suite	Comprehensive sets of general tools that can include project management, collaboration (communication, file sharing, etc.), office productivity tools, financial tools, human resources management, etc.	Zoho Google Apps
Course creation and management systems	Create and deliver online courses with a variety of engagement and management tools.	Moodle Blackboard eFront Udutu Adobe Captivate
Wiki platforms	Build and manage knowledge repositories, including allowing others to contribute.	Wikispaces PBworks
Social networks	Use multiple tools for collaborating, including discussion threads, file sharing, and private groups.	Yammer Facebook Huddle LinkedIn Google+ Communities



COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEMS

Comprehensive systems are designed to meet all of the needs of an educator professional development process. Supporting a range of learning stages, from initial induction to observations and follow-up paperwork, these systems are designed specifically for educator professional learning.

Marguerite Dimgba, director of the professional learning center for Greece Central School District in New York, uses MyLearningPlan as a comprehensive system for the district's professional learning.

Dimgba cites the system's ability to reduce paperwork, centralize resources, and link multiple activities. "From

a management standpoint, we can upload documentation that comes with the course, so we no longer have paper files. Everything is stored in a team room, so it is a communication tool and an easy way to retrieve data on courses, proposal forms, or notes for date changes. For evaluations, we used to scribble notes to leave for the teacher, but now we can complete a course evaluation and collect data on impact and student performance. It makes it easier to link teacher impact with teacher effectiveness."

The reduced fragmentation is a huge benefit for Dimgba. "We have 1,100 teachers and 12,000 students, so

(MyLearningPlan) was a way for us to make everything work together. It has benefits for communication, such as for committees or for people to pose questions. It allows dialogues outside of committee and coursework and puts a structure in place. I know there are other tools out there, but you don't want people to log into yet another system. This gives us a one-stop shop for our professional learning needs. Now our teacher conferences, in-house learning, and teacher evaluation system are all tied together. It used to be that some things were in an old database, on paper, or in different departments."

COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEMS

Tool	Description
My Learning Plan	My Learning Plan is described as an "observation and appraisal management system" that manages scheduling, record keeping, and evaluation reporting for staff at all levels.
Truenorthlogic	This system offers an educator effectiveness model that facilitates and manages professional learning from induction to ongoing career management and evaluation.
School Improvement Network	This system offers its own educator effectiveness model, Common Core implementation resources, and on-demand videos.
Teachscape	Self-described as human capital management, this service offers observation and evaluation management, professional learning, and talent management systems.