

Don't Make Me Collaborate

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## ABSTRACT:

Instructors can integrate one or two different collaborative learning tools in order to enliven and enrich their learning environments as well as encourage group participation with greater success than traditional collaborative methods. After the definition of the technologies and some history, the work will define best practices and practical uses in collaborative scenarios for class work. The work will show some real examples using these technologies and talk about best practices for using the new collaborative technologies. New collaborative technologies such as wikis, blogs, vlogs, podcasts, and discussion boards are beneficial because the new collaborative methods provide active and engaging content creation in asynchronous environments. Instructors can integrate one or two different collaborative learning tools in order to enliven and enrich their learning environments as well as encourage group participation with greater success than traditional collaborative methods.

What if I told you that there is a whole group of learners who like to share and work together? What if I told you the group of learners I am referring to are already sitting in your classrooms waiting for you to come share with them?

When beginning a conversation about collaboration in the classroom, traditionalists will think of the tried and true method of hand pairing students to complete an assignment in which the grouped students research and then present the material to the rest of the class. The same traditionalist will look at you and say, “I do not include discussion boards or group projects because students hate them!”

You want to know a secret?

Students do not hate collaboration! What they hate is the traditional methods of collaboration that are flat and lifeless compared to the methods that Net Gen is already employing in their online life (Tapscott and Williams, 52).

Online life? Yes, online life. The students that you are teaching are typically part of Net Gen (Network Generation), a generation of students born between 1977 to 1996. (Tapscott, 37) To quote Tapscott and Williams, “. . . this new generation of youthful users is bringing the same interactive ethos into everyday life, including work, education, and consumption.” These students have never known a world without computing power, and most do not remember life before the World Wide Web explosion of NCSA’s Mosaic/Netscape of early 1990 (NCSA).

These students have gone from Web 1.0 (passive content that you read) to Web 2.0 without missing a beat.

Web 2.0 refers to the current generation of web content. The content in Web 2.0 is active content. Active content involves on some level, the participation of the viewer

and, often times, actual shared content creation among groups (Tapscott and Williams, 19). Collaboration!.

Many of you have been participating in active content use and creation without ever realizing that you are doing so. The same lack of notice applies to Net Gen. Most do not know what Web 2.0 is, and most will not care if you ask them. As far as they know, this is the way the network is and has always been (Tapscott and Williams, 19).

Most of your students are already collaborating using technologies such as blogs (personal online journals or web logs), podcasts (similar to a blog but in audio form), vlogs/vodcasts (the same as a blog or podcast but done with video) and wikis (hypertext content that is created and editable by anyone) (Wikipedia).

What makes a blog a blog and not a journal? What makes an MP3 a Podcast and not a music file? What makes a vlog or vodcast not just a video? Really simple. Really Simple Syndication that is! RSS technology provides a user the ability to subscribe to a feed (information used to direct the viewer or aggregator to the content sought) with an aggregator or reader of feeds. RSS has become a popular method for content retrieval and tracking and can be found even in Internet Explorer 7.

RSS 2.0 is the current version of Really Simple Syndication. Earlier versions include RDF, RSS .90 and .91. RSS 2.0 and Atom are the most recent versions of this technology that use the hypertext language XML as its basis. Using an XML script, content is tagged and marked for aggregators or readers to reach out for updates. These readers take the directions from the XML or RSS feed on where to look for new content. The reader, on a schedule preset by you, goes out to all the sites that you have requested

and gathers up any new info on the site you have marked and brings it to you (Finkelstein, 14-16). Kind of like a shopper. You only have to control how often you wish to see the updates and which updates you wish to see. A great example that you probably have used would be iTunes.

Let us take a moment in this discussion to thank David Winer (a software developer) and Adam Curry (a former MTV video jockey) respectively for the leap forward from 2000 to present in which RSS was honed, refined, and released with the capability of enclosing feeds that contained not just text, but audio. Winer worked first on pulling hypertext from sites into an aggregator for news readers, but Adam Curry saw another use for RSS, pulling music. Curry helped to develop iPodder the predecessor of the mammoth music store that is iTunes. (Curry)

Thanks to sites like iPodder and iTunes, it is now possible to enclose multimedia such as MP3s (audio) or MP4V (videos) for pulling into aggregators and uploading to your multimedia player. Note that the term iPod was not used. Why? Because there are all sorts of players out there from Blackberry phones to PDAs. All of them are capable of using RSS technology and usually have free readers installed on them. If there is not an RSS reader on your device, all you have to do is go look at sites like iPodder for free options. If you want a reader with more features you can spend around 29 dollars for software like FeedDemon on NewsGator (Finkelstein, 250,252)

Active sharing of open collaborative technologies involves exchanging content, commenting on content, and creating new content together using one of the previously mentioned media types and sometimes more than one of the previously mentioned media

types. They are actively engaged in the process of learning and sharing their learning with each other (Tremblay, 1-2).

Students are often turned off by the passive content creation of typical collaborative projects. They do not want to gather materials about a chapter and just give you a report. They want to do something with it!

Tapscott and Williams illuminate modern collaboration with the following, “The new art and science of wikinomics (*term applied to collaborative technologies in education and the workplace*) is based upon four powerful new ideas: openness, peering, sharing, and acting globally.”

He is referring to openness as open source or collaborations where anyone can make contributions or edit content as well as referencing the trend of corporations opening up content for outside contributors (Tapscott and Williams, 20).

Peering is the abolition of hierarchy in favor of horizontal organization, all contributors have equal importance. (Tapscott and Williams, 25)

Sharing in Tapscott and Williams’ definition covers the sharing of created content and the release of that content into collaborative environments for editing, contribution, and comment. Sharing also refers to creating a mass shared computing platform in which users link their computers together physically to share computational power to solve a problem (Tapscott and Williams, 25-27)

Finally, acting globally in Tapscott and Williams’ definition, “. . .has no physical or regional boundaries. It builds planetary ecosystems for designing, sourcing, assembling, and distributing products on a global basis.” (Tapscott and Williams, 29-30).

If one explores some of the more popular sites for collaborative content creation, one will immediately notice that it is not dull and dreary content. It is vibrant, has life, and, most importantly, creative personality. Your students want to express themselves and they have an amazing set of new tools and languages to do so. Your students are already following Tapscott and Williams' principles of Wikinomics!

Social sites such as Myspace (<http://www.myspace.com>) , YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com>) , and second life (<http://www.secondlife.com>) are great places to go to start to understand the mindset of the Net Gen student. You will find that most students have an alternate life on the web, an alter ego of sorts.

In fact, second life touts that it is for creating the life that you want to live. You create an Avatar or digital representation of yourself in Second Life and then proceed to “get a life” so to speak. You can buy land for your digital self, you can create furniture and other items, and you can even buy and sell digital goods for REAL money (Rymaszewski, 6-21).

The virtual realm of second life is fast becoming an alternate classroom space for universities to engage students who walk in both the real class space and the digital forum.

Charles Nesson and his daughter Rebecca Nesson of Harvard Law School have, perhaps one of the best examples of the incorporation of a second life classroom in practical use. If you are curious, you can visit via a SLurl (second life url) from [www.secondlife.com/education](http://www.secondlife.com/education). You can also visit <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/cyberone/> for a video detailing their second life classroom experiment.

You can create a second life account for free, but if you want to own land or be able to store your creations on that land, you have to pay at least \$9.95 a month in US dollars. Linden is the money exchange within Second Life and can be purchased by “exchanging” US dollars. The exchange rate is on your side at around 250 Linden for US dollar (Rymaszewski, 19-21). As an educational institution you can buy an island or parcel of digital land that cannot be accessed by adult rated content creators for a start up cost of the island price and 1 year of maintenance fees which is a total of \$2680 US dollars. After that your institution would need to set aside \$1750 US dollars per year for maintenance of your island ([www.secondlife.com/education](http://www.secondlife.com/education)).

The virtual world of second life may not be for the professor who is not a digital native: yet. It takes an understanding of three dimensional creation and scripting for adding audio or animations to make the spaces vibrant and interactive. However, think of it as a collaborative effort that could cross more than one class space. Computer Science students in conjunction with graphic arts/digital arts students could create the classroom together. Students from language arts might come every Friday into the space to do poetry readings and critiques. Again, this takes true collaboration, but it is the kind of collaboration that will excite your students, and you may find them putting in extra time because they LIKE working with others to get the project done. Check out the educational forum of Second Life at: [www.secondlife.com/education](http://www.secondlife.com/education)

Now, onto blogs. A blog is a type of online journal or web log that others can read and comment on. The first blogs were initially generated from discussion boards and web pages maintained by those who devoted hours of time to update them and post them out to others to read via email. With the advent of RSS technology, these first

small steps have become a mountain of content known lovingly as the blogosphere (Tapscott and Williams, 40).

Examples of current blog sites include:

-Myspace (<http://www.myspace.com>)

-Friendster (<http://www.friendster.com>)

-Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com>)

-Technorati (<http://technorati.com>) .

Myspace is a social networking site that was created to keep up with the underground L.A. music scene. It was an open source networking site. Basically you made your page and could link to anyone else's page. It now has over 100,000,000 users of all ages. (Tapscott and Williams, 48-50)

The open type of technology used in Myspace is in direct contrast with other social sites like Friendster which only allowed you to network to people you knew or knew their addresses. Myspace was and is searchable. You can become friends with anyone. The loss of Friendster's following to Myspace is a prime example of open or group work versus closed sites (Tapscott and Williams, 48-50). The take away lesson for an educator is that open is good and closed is bad. If there is not enough freedom to create the students will not collaborate.

In plain terms, this means that collaborative works in which there is too much control and little room to mash is not favored. Students want growing room. Mashing is

the combination of one or more specifically focused soft wares or programming languages to accomplish a new objective (Tapscott and Williams, 38).

Yes, set parameters, but leave an x factor. Quite often students will surprise you with how they take your directions and run with them. You may start out with a project to identify rocks and come out with new software for scanning them in and matching them to a database your students have compiled!

Myspace, Blogger, and other blog (web journal) sites typically cost nothing to join, but if upgraded will give you more features. If you own a server, software can be obtained from places like Blojsom for free to create a blog service. (Winkler)

If you have a blog, it typically has the ability to send an update to an aggregator. For example in Blogger you can subscribe to the blog of someone who writes about something that interests you by clicking on the RSS feed button within their journal. Your internal aggregator in Blogger will show you the updates or comments posted to that subscription (Tapscott and Williams, 40).

A step up from the journaling or blog sites like Myspace or the more serious Blogger, one will find the technology of podcasting.

Podcasting is an audio form of journaling or blogging that uses the MP3 file type to broadcast over the internet or publish to RSS aggregators. (Curry)

Now more popular, and certainly on everyone's tongues at the moment is YouTube. YouTube was recently purchased by Google to add to their searchable content. YouTube has some of the most active and interactive content out there! Your students are making vlogs (video blogs) already.

They surf around and look at each other's vlogs and comment with their own vlog. Sometimes they create content such as animations of poetry or short films to share. They then comment on them, make replies with other animations, or start a new conversation with another piece of content. (Tapscott and Williams, 143-145) Sometimes these vlogs get so popular that they have hundreds of thousands of viewers. Occasionally a piece will be so well received it goes viral.

Huh? Viral? Viral video as it is called, consists of a video that is so popular that it gets emailed, posted on other sites, and sometimes makes it onto the television news broadcast (Wikipedia, Viral\_video). Please keep in mind that popular is not always tasteful, or good. The video of Saddam's execution is an example of a viral video.

"Well that is wonderful," you say.

"But, how do I use this?"

Imagine having your students work together to create a short film essay about a topic or maybe cross collaborate with another class. Grab a few anatomy and physiology students and put them in touch with a couple of communication students and you might come up with study guides that are visual, verbal, and humorous (pun intended).

Perhaps your acting students need a creative outlet for their abundant talent, why not pair them up with marketing students for creating short commercials.

Do you see how powerful this tool is? Students love to make things that are impressive, helpful, and most of all fun. All you need to do is direct their focus.

Other traditional collaborative technologies are currently spiced up in Web 2.0 include the wiki. Do you remember Hypercard (Wikipedia, HyperCard)? Well the wiki

is a collaborative environment that has its basis in the hypertext programming language of traditional Hypercard stacks.

A wiki is editable by anyone. It is not the product of one person, but of many. A wiki is another example of open source versus closed in which open is the magic that allows easy collaboration with actively changing content (Tapscott and Williams, 71-72).

Wiki is defined by Wikipedia.org as:

“...a [website](#) that allows visitors to add, remove, [edit](#) and change content, typically without the need for registration. It also allows for [linking](#) among any number of pages. This ease of interaction and operation makes a wiki an effective tool for mass [collaborative authoring](#). The term wiki also can refer to the [collaborative software](#) itself ([wiki engine](#)) that facilitates the operation of such a site, or to certain specific wiki sites, including the [computer science](#) site (the original wiki) [WikiWikiWeb](#) and online encyclopedias such as [Wikipedia](#).”

In Hypercard one can visualize content on virtual notecards. Each notecard can link to another notecard. In a wiki each virtual card or content area can link to another content area in a seamless and much easier process (Wikipedia, HyperCard).

When you create a wiki with your students you are in essence creating a virtual book. Each content area can be linked to another student's content area for a seamless reading on a topic or multiple topics with clickable words (hyperlinks) that lead you to more info on a new topic (Wikipedia, Wiki\_Wiki\_web). Wikipedia, though a good example, is not the only example of wiki technology at work.

Wiki software can be purchased to run on an ASP or Java server. The new Leopard for Xserve by Apple will include both blog and wiki software for creating your own wiki and blog servers (Apple).

If you do not have your own server, Wikispaces.com is a place to start your own wiki. For free you can obtain 2GB of space to share with your group or for 100 dollars a month you can buy 40GB of space with unlimited edits and users. Other companies such as Learning Objects offer services that can be integrated with your Learning Management System to offer wiki software to students.

The most common tools for collaboration are wikis, blogs, vlogs, podcasts, vodcasts, as well as discussion forums. I have saved discussion forums for last, with good reason.

Discussion forums are built into every LMS and are readily available for use. They are intended to be an area for users to post discussions or conversations in text form. They have their roots as far back as the late 80's and early 90's with bulletin boards and newsgroups (Wikipedia, Internet\_Form). In these early forums content was posted or an idea posted and others would respond to that content. Lively debates and friendships were formed around common interests among those posting in the discussion forums.

Unfortunately, in the LMS environments, discussions are not always used to their maximum potential. Most instructors seem to use them as drop boxes for short essay type assignment. Then, they compel their students with loss of points to respond to short essay type answers from their classmates. Students hate doing them and I cannot tell you the countless times I have seen the words, "...less discussion boards would improve the class."

Are they wrong? Yes and no. It is not about how many discussion boards you use, it is about the type of work you ask for. The new LMS discussion boards in Blackboard, Desire 2 Learn, and even Moodle allow you to post content other than text. You can attach whole documents, put in website links, and even a shot of your favorite pet. So then why do we insist on just writing? Should this not be a lively exchange of ideas that can get students excited to talk to one another?

Discussion boards can also be used to answer questions about material in the readings, or as a way to carry on a further discussion with questions that draw the readings together for students.

Some face to face professors use enhanced online class spaces for discussion boards to prepare for the next class or to continue talking about the last lesson and answer questions that came up. Students often post for clarification or to talk about the conclusions they have come to (Tremblay, 1-6).

Instructors may put up images, scanned in articles, web links, and other multi media to engender curiosity and exploration. You could find a video on YouTube about a hot topic and get a class response. You could also link to a Podcast or Vodcast and have students comment on the opinions or research of another person in your field.

A best practice for Discussion Boards, however, is be specific to include the requirement that they use terms and concepts from their readings to frame the conversation so that the content they are giving you shows their understanding of the material (Tremblay, 1-6). It also saves you from reading three paragraphs of a rant, a

long and often negative speech (Wikipedia, Rant), and helps with prevention of flaming or aggressive posts towards another student's post, by making the discussion at least semi formal (Wikipedia, Flame\_War).

There are also discussion forums out there for just about every discipline you can imagine. Physics, math, K-12 Educators, and even Dali lovers. Most all of them are free services. You can have your students subscribe for a semester and post with in one of these forums. You can monitor the content there and possibly bring some of the discussion back into the Learning Management System that your class is in.

Collaborative online technologies are all available in price ranges from free (Moodle) to a higher end of 15,000 to 20,000 dollars a year (Horizon Wimba Live Classroom). It is up to you as the educator to decide which ones have the most value for your classroom. As with any use of technology, do not let the technology drive the lesson, but let the lesson drive the technology.

Tapscott and Williams give a few good rules on pages 286-289 of Wikinomics for using collaborative technologies in the workplace, a sort of business best practices. Though intended for business, they can be adapted to educational best practices as well.

The first of them is, "Take cues from your lead users." Though they apply it to a social site collaboration, educators can translate this idea to mean allowing students to create the rules of their learning community together. Let the students, or users, who use the technology help to monitor the system and set rules. Most students already have

learned best practices within the social environments that they naturally carry over to the online learning environment.

The next is, “Building critical mass.” In order for a collaborative environment to be successful, you must have a large enough group to interact. If there are only two people posting, you may not have enough attraction to cause interaction among the rest of your students. This does not mean force them to post, rather, it means you should create discussions or projects they can not RESIST posting or adding to.

“Supplying an infrastructure for collaboration,” involves choosing the correct technology, whether it is blog, vlog, wiki, or discussion forum to build critical mass. It is the nuts and bolts part for the educator to pick the most appropriate technology for the learning outcome sought.

“Take your time to get all the structures and governances right.” Every society needs rules in order to change chaos into order. Anarchy is not appreciated by anyone involved. Clearly define for those using the technology what can be expected from them and lay out rules for engagement. Unfortunately as in all societies, one must also create penalties for those who break the rules. What constitutes “getting voted off the island” to use the popular television phrase from Survivor.

“Make sure participants can harvest some value.” One might think of this as, “What’s in it for me?”

Make sure that your students have a reason to engage. Sometimes it might be social, sometimes it may be points, and sometimes it might simply be a hunger for

philosophizing with peers. Be creative and think about what might engage you to complete the task.

Students do not like too much ambiguity about the expected outcome. “Abide by community norms,” might be used as a way to create examples of the kinds of things you expect to see. Give them average points expected for the examples. It does not mean you have to tell them word for word what to do, but give them a concrete base. The students who are more creative will go beyond the example, and the students who work by the book will feel comfortable as well.

“Let the process evolve.” A most important rule of thumb for any educator is that every student and every group of students do not learn the same way or interact the same way. When collaborating, remember that sometimes you may have to look at the project or assignment and gear it towards the group you have. It will by that nature evolve over several semesters or even years!

“Engaging in collaborative communities means ceding some control, sharing responsibility, embracing transparency, managing conflict, and accepting that successful projects will take on a life of their own.” (Tapscott and Williams, 289)

The above quote is in reference to the last of our defining principles, “Hone your collaborative mind.” It is hard for anyone to allow others to take control of a situation, and as an educator, sometimes harder. Tapscott and Williams go on to say, “It means learning new skill sets that emphasize building trust, honoring commitments, changing dynamically, and sharing decision making with peers.” As an educator, remember that

students learn by example. Place trust in your students so they will in turn trust you and each other in your collaborative environment. If an educator shows no fear or resistance to the use of technology in collaboration, the students will ease into its use and often excel in its use!

The application of educational best practices was achieved through applying the ideas in *“Technical Evaluation Report: 55. Best Practices and Collaborative Software In Online Teaching”* by Remi Tremblay to the business best practices in *Wikinomics* by Tapscott and Williams.

In conclusion your students are already collaborating using technologies such as blogs, podcasts, vlogs/vodcasts, wikis, and discussion boards or forums in a social context. The challenge the educator faces is how to pull the technology into the classroom in a way that the students will respond to the educational content as they do to the social content. The secret to engaging your waiting collaborators is to make the content open, active, and engaging. A little exploration into their social collaborations and online lives will help you apply learning outcomes to tasks they are already doing. Creation of valuable, meaningful, and collaborative content can be created if an educator can shape a project but be flexible, allow for the fun factor, and create surmountable challenges.

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