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Outside the Box: A Multi-Lingual Forum

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The Techno-Tip

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This issue's tech tip considers group sites. Group sites are a useful alternative for people who don't know how to write code but want some of the facility that a web page or a Moodle space make available. All of the Internet's big three mail providers have offered some form of group support for quite some time now. More recently, some independent organizations are offering similar services. This article will look at Google Groups, Microsoft's SkyDrive, Yahoo Groups, as well as GroupSpaces, an independent company that is carving out a growing niche in this area (see Table 1). Several spaces are in transition at this time, and so some of the features discussed below may change over time. Although it may perhaps not be the best time to declare a definitively preferred space, this article will nonetheless consider the utility of each space at the time of writing.

Why Use a Group Site?

Group sites are useful for maintaining communication for any number of organizations, such as university clubs, community organizations and, of course, classes. This report will focus largely on educational applications, although many of the functions discussed are equally useful in other settings.

Educational Applications for Group Spaces

I have found group spaces to be very helpful, especially because they allow my students to upload and download files. I first set up a group space to allow my students to upload PowerPoint presentation files prior to class. Before that, I had considerable difficulty because most of my classes weren't in computer labs, and so students had to bring their presentation files on a memory stick (or floppy disc!). This added considerably to class time entailed for the activity. Using a group space (Google at the time), I was able to have students upload their assignments, download them, and save them in a folder that

was ready before class even started. It saved a great deal of time and trouble!

As I became comfortable with group space facilities, I began asking students to take a picture of themselves with their phone, and to upload it to the group space. I used the pictures to memorize students' names and to create profiles of each student. It's possible to upload most file formats, so I also began asking students to record tongue twisters using their mobile phone and to upload them.

As almost all of my students have a computer at home, I now ask my student to write their essays using a word processor, and to upload their assignments a day before class. If it's not too busy a week, this allows me to correct them and hand them back all within a one week turn-around, thus greatly reducing feedback lag-time. In addition to the above, I use my group spaces for group mailings, providing a course schedule, posting announcements, posting students' grades, providing links for further study, and forums for conversation and writing.

How to Create a Group Space

The first thing to do to create a group is to register it. The person who registers a group becomes its primary administrator, although they can delegate administrative powers to anyone in the group. The big three – Yahoo, Google, and Microsoft require that anyone who wants to register and join a group has to have a mail account set up with their service. This can be a problem because it means the entire community of users has to set up mail accounts and some people might not want them. In the case of GroupSpaces, users can register using any mail address, be it a mobile address or an email address.

Next, there are two ways an administrator can invite other members. The registration process allows an administrator to specify a group name (provided it is not already taken) and a URL address. From there it is possible to either (a) send out invitations to all

Table 1. *Features Listed by Group*

Feature	GroupSpaces	Google	SkyDrive	Yahoo
uploading files	o	x	o	o
downloading files	o	x	o	o
group mailings	o	o	o	o
Forum	o	x	x	x
Polling	x	x	x	o
Calendar	o	o	o	o
events page	o	x	x	x
membership limit	50*	x	x	x
multi-lingual	x	o	o	o
custom background	o	x	x	x
Space	250MB	5GB	7GB	100MB

* More members are possible with paid plans.

potential members, or (b) somehow otherwise provide the registration URL to people who should join the group. In my case I am using GroupSpaces now, and it is possible to copy the URL and display it to my students as a QR code (see figure one). Most students have QR code readers and Internet access on their phones, so I have found this to be a highly expedient way to quickly recruit group members. Students can register with their mobile address and log in later from a computer. I also display the URL for students who are unable to register using their phones and have them copy it to input later on a computer. Although the process is somewhat more cumbersome, students have been 100% successful when registering to join groups that I have set up.

In any case, the administrator has to set the group's security settings to 'anyone can join' before aspiring members can join. Once this is done, it is highly advisable to have group members join as quickly as possible. This is because it is best to use a private and secure membership setting so as to avoid unwanted lurkers and other potentially malevolent presences. In the past I have had two groups swamped with membership requests from non-students. Furthermore, administrators should be wary of vandalism. I have seen some decidedly profane postings in otherwise well-intended sites due to lax security settings. Once the majority of members have joined, a group can be closed to the general public. It is still possible for people to apply to join, in

which case the administrator will receive a mail and can easily approve or deny requests on a case-by-case basis.

My Choice (for now)

I have used all the group providers mentioned in this article and, for the moment, I am happiest with GroupSpaces. As mentioned above, it is the only provider that allows users to access all of a group's facilities without setting up a dedicated mail address with that group's provider. Its various layout options provide the closest thing to a web page

environment. It's possible to set the banner on the page to any image the user chooses. In my case I use the same background as my university's homepage, and many students don't even know that it isn't an official university page. GroupSpaces is also the most mobile friendly site, and this is important because it allows my students to access the group anytime anywhere using their phones. A final reason I will continue to favor GroupSpaces at the moment is that I think it is the most likely candidate to maintain consistent features and services. The big three providers are at a transition point right now. If I had to choose a (distant) second preference, it would be Yahoo Groups. I like their polling function. Furthermore, the majority of features that initially attracted me to use groups are still available. Both Google Group and MS Groups are works in progress at the moment and integral group features, such as file sharing, are now located in other places, such as Google Drive or Skydrive. For the sake of simplicity and ease of use, having all group features inside the group and on one page decides the matter for my purposes. At this precise moment, I wouldn't recommend either Google or Microsoft groups spaces. Until they bundle their group services better, I'd say they both lack the facility I'd like to see in a group space. Still, competition in this domain seems to be inspiring significant upgrades. Just as this article was going to press, Microsoft's Skydrive announced a

survey application using Excel (<<http://blogs.windows.com/skydrive/b/skydrive/archive/2012/11/08/excel-surveys-now-available.aspx>>), and both Microsoft and Google are letting it be known that further applications will be available in the near future. It therefore behooves educators and other interested parties to stay abreast of what



Figure 1.
QR code with URL
for group space

is available from each of these providers, and to perhaps even participate in development forums to let providers know what facilities would be useful in educational settings.

All too often, companies seem to be operating in a vacuum when it comes to anticipating the needs of educators when developing applications and products for the education market.

Room for Improvement

There are still a number of features I would like to see in a group space that could optimize them for educational purposes. I'd like to be able to create folders that would allow me to download in one fell swoop instead of downloading files one at a time. In addition, I sometimes worry that students are able to download and view each other's files. I try to be quick about downloading student assignments and deleting them from the group site, however I can't administer the group space all day. With this in mind, it would be helpful to be able to specify who is able to upload and download files within a given folder. Another feature that I would like to see would be a forum space where it is relatively easy to see all posts on one page. Google Groups used to have this feature but it was discarded in the course of their renovations. The reason I would like such a feature is that it would be helpful to be able to copy and paste all comments with one action, instead of having to open numerous posts. Such posts are a valuable way to get students to write, and it's helpful to be able to quickly have a copy of everyone's comments on a given topic. It facilitates a teacher's ability to

display and review such comments in class and to provide feedback about them.

For the sake of readers who might be interested, I've set up a temporary group using GroupSpaces. It can be accessed using the QR code below or at <http://groupspaces.com/OutsidetheBoxAMultilingualForu/join/>

Given that we only meet once a week, groups have become an invaluable resource for my communication with my students, and an integral part of how I conduct my classes. Groups provide the facility of a web page without the learning curve. They can be learned to the point where they can be used in a very short time. With this in mind, I highly recommend groups.