

New Media Education with Online Tools

Dr. Jason Caudill
Assistant Professor of Business
Carson-Newman College
2130 Branner Ave.
C-N Box 71887
865-471-2064
jcaudill@cn.edu

Ms. Loretta Noles
Director of Online & Distance Learning
Carson-Newman College
2130 Branner Ave.
C-N Box 71887
lnoles@cn.edu

Abstract: New media is playing a role in the way students connect with one another and the ways in which they seek and find employment and other opportunities. Traditionally, creating and managing web sites took a certain amount of technical savvy. Today, however, new media options have made it much easier to create and manage multimedia websites. Participants in this session will get to work hands-on with this new technology.

Introduction

New media may be broadly defined as media that is, "...fluid, individualized connectivity, a medium to distribute and control freedom" (Chun & Keenan, 2006). More specifically, many practitioners consider new media to include much of what is commonly referred to as Web 2.0 technology; blogs, social networking sites, virtual worlds, and even previously existing web technologies such as personal web sites and the online distribution of digital media. Inside a school of Business, as is the case in this paper, new media may best be defined as available web technologies to disseminate the qualifications and experiences of students to employers and the world.

Increasingly, employers and others are expecting candidates for jobs and internships to have an online presence. Recruiters want to be able to view a resume online. Student organizations at colleges and universities need web sites for recruitment and organizational purposes. Conversely, budget restrictions are making it increasingly difficult for educational institutions to support the hosting and other services required to provide and maintain student web spaces.

One possible solution to this paradox is to introduce students to the use of available free web creation and hosting services online. The remainder of this paper will discuss the uses and implementation of such technology, and the benefits that can be drawn by students.

The Old Media Experience

Many individuals with a background in technology, particularly those who have taken courses in technology, can remember the tried and true method of learning how to create web pages. On the first day of class, students are introduced to Notepad, or an equivalent text program, and the process of creating web sites in basic HTML code begins. There is nothing wrong with this

experience, and in many cases, even today, it is highly beneficial to students to learn web design from the code level forward.

After the first, basic web page was complete, students would then enter into the seemingly complex, and perhaps highly frustrating, realm of online file management systems.

The file management of web sites can be very intimidating for students learning web design for the first time. This is particularly true if the students are working in a Unix environment or something similar where they have file folders for e-mail and other applications in addition to their website. Beyond the issues of helping students to understand that website files need to go into their public_html folder are the issues of explaining to them that images need to go into an images folder, that the default page for their website needs to be titled default or index, and any number of other details about file formatting that can make the difference between a site functioning or failing.

Compounding the file system management issue is the difficulty that can be faced when students must use an older, web-based file management system. Simply navigating the file system can be a difficult enough task, but doing so while working through a cumbersome system of selecting and uploading files one at a time seems to make the entire process even more frustrating for the students. The alternative of using a file transfer protocol (FTP) client, however, can in some instances make things worse. Training students new to working on networks how to configure and use an FTP client may add a layer of complexity that puts web design out of the reach of the average computer user.

While none of these issues may seem to be unusually challenging to technology experts, or even to students majoring in a technical field, they can be very difficult for students whose focus is on other, non-technical specialties. What is important to remember is that increasingly these non-technical specialists need to have an online presence. The question then becomes how to provide these students with the tools they need to be online without taking them through the full series of technology training.

Using Google Sites

Google Sites is actually Google's second-generation website development and hosting service. Google Pages was the original service, and while the original service was highly workable, Google Sites has made some helpful upgrades. Google Sites is, when used at the most basic level, an easier interface than the old Google Pages. Conversely, Google Sites also has more advanced customization options than those that were available on Google Pages. So, Google Sites is one of the unusual technology applications that provides both a basic user interface and also an advanced set of tools.

Google Sites provides 100 MB of storage, along with a custom URL, for user websites. Users can also create multiple sites under a single Google Sites account. The Google Sites process begins with the creation of a Google account.

A user's Google account will provide access to all of the different Google applications, including Google Sites and Picasa, the Google photo album application. Setting up the account is a simple matter of filling out an online form available through the sign-in page at google.com, then confirming the creation of the new account. Once the account has been created users can activate both Gmail and Google Sites accounts.

Gmail is Google's mail application. While this is not strictly a component of the website, a new e-mail address can be very useful for the user. Gmail provides over 7 GB of storage space per account, which can give users much more space to work with than the average institutional email system. Not only can this additional storage be useful, but as a third party account a student's Gmail account will remain active and available even after the student graduates and leaves the institution. Also, the Gmail account can be directly linked to the Google Sites website, providing an integrated online communication system.

Creating a Google Sites account is similar to setting up the Gmail account. Once a user is logged into their Google account they simply follow the links to Google Sites, where they will be asked to log in again for security. Creating the site starts as simply as just clicking on the Create site button. On the form that follows a site name will be chosen, which will define the URL for the main page, a description can be entered, privacy settings for the page are chosen, and a site theme is selected. With these selections made the site is created and ready for editing.

For new users the editing process is very simple. With a newly created site the user clicks in the area of the page they want to edit and type in the content that they want to enter. With details like the page sections, background colors, font type, size, and color, and sidebar navigation already set, there is little between the user creating the page and entering content in the page.

Once a user has entered text content into a page Google Sites also makes links and photos simple. An insert menu provides users with an intuitive method for inserting images or creating hyperlinks. Images can be uploaded from a user's computer or the URL of an image that is already online can be entered. Once entered, Google Sites provides the option of, with just a single click, displaying the image at original size or in a large, medium, or small format. This is much more simple than the process of uploading images to a dedicated images folder inside the public_html folder and then properly referencing that image for the insertion. Like many of the issues involved in new media the file structure supporting online images is a simple concept for technologists to understand, but it can be complicated for novice web designers. Google Sites takes this complication out of the equation and provides novice users with the ability to just move directly into production.

Hyperlinks can be created from the insert menu as well. For the links, Google Sites gives users the option of linking to a URL or linking to another page on the site. This makes creating links very simple, and also saves the novice user the difficulty of trying to understand and implement concepts such as relative URL's and other issues that relate to linking within a single website.

After creating an initial page a user can start the second page of the site by just clicking the Create new page button. This provides the user with the same interface and same tools as the first page, as well as the option to name their new page. Once the second page is created the insert hyperlink option allows users to link directly to other pages within their site, without having to enter any URL information.

Beyond the basic creation of pages Google Sites users have a virtually unlimited potential for customization. The first step of customization after the basic site creation is the option to change the layout and colors of the page. Users can change the size of each frame on the page, the number of frames, and can turn the sidebar navigation on or off. Colors can also be customized for both the page and also different types of text, providing different colors for body

text, links, active links, visited links, and other designations. All of these options are menu driven; none of them require the user to enter or modify any code.

Another potentially useful feature included in Google Sites is its ability to create a file page and other custom pages. The file page allows users to upload files and creates a directory where viewers of the site can go to view or download the posted files. This is a much easier interface for the novice user than the practice of uploading files to a file management system of some sort and then creating a hyperlink to the proper location, including the correct file extensions.

Other page creation options in Google Sites include a dashboard, announcements, and list pages. The dashboard is a pre-formatted page where users can insert what Google calls gadgets, any one of a variety of online applications to supplement a web site's content. These include documents, slideshows, calendars, and other items. The announcements page works somewhat like a traditional blog, where users can create individual posts. The list page makes it fast and easy for a user to create an online list. Google Sites has pre-formatted lists in the form of Action Items, Issue Lists, and Unit Status, or a user can create their own format. This tool can be very useful for sites keeping track of projects or other issues where an online record of events or items can be useful.

For the advanced user coding is an option. Google Sites provides an interface through which users can write HTML code themselves or edit the code of a page that they created through the Google Sites interface. Thus, Google Sites can serve not only as a media creation tool, but can also provide hosting space for students who are learning how to create web pages with HTML.

Companions to Google Sites

Google Sites can function very well as a stand-alone application. The functionality of Google Sites, however, can be greatly enhanced by the complimentary use of other Google applications such as Picasa and Google Docs. By integrating these different services into a single multimedia product users can go well beyond the capabilities of the separate applications individually.

While Google Sites will allow users to include images, the 100 MB storage space is somewhat limiting for an online photo gallery. The solution to this problem is to utilize another Google application, Picasa. Picasa is Google's online photo gallery application, which has both a downloaded and an online component.

Picasa users download the free application and install it on their local machine. This application can automatically scan the user's computer for pictures, looking only at the folders the user designates, group those pictures, and quickly upload the pictures to online galleries. The online interface gives users the option to enable privacy settings on galleries, make notes about their photos, and even connect to Google Earth to indicate the location of each photo. Viewers of the online galleries can also make comments on the pictures. Overall, Picasa provides a very interactive photo experience, which can also be configured to be secure.

To connect Picasa to Google Sites users have two primary options. The first is to create a link from their website to their Picasa gallery. The other is to use the previously mentioned dashboard page to embed a Picasa slideshow gadget directly onto the page. In either case, Picasa provides a simple to use solution for incorporating photo galleries into the online media experience.

For the sharing, hosting, or collaboration with documents Google Docs is an excellent tool. The origin of Google Docs actually traces back to an online word processing program called Writely, which Google acquired. Over time, Google Docs has expanded to include not only a word processor but also spreadsheet and presentation capabilities.

Google Docs provides users with many unique features. For users who may be traveling or working from multiple computers, Google Docs will store files online and the applications run entirely online so there is no need to install programs on a computer or worry about operating system compatibility when working on multiple machines. There are, however, many more advantages to Google Docs than simply the availability of the files and applications online.

Users can invite viewers or collaborators via e-mail to work with them on documents or to just view documents online. Documents can also be easily transferred among multiple users. Used in combination with the available gadgets on Google Sites, Google Docs can potentially provide a fully integrated document sharing and collaboration environment, all through easy to use, freely available services online.

Conclusion

While it is relatively easy for technologists to become overly focused on the technology behind Google Sites and other Google Apps, it is important to keep in mind the purposes for which these tools are used. Students and others who are not technology experts now have the ability to produce and utilize advanced multimedia tools. There is no requirement for people to purchase expensive software, they do not need years of training or a book about how to write programming code, people just need access to the Internet and some basic instruction.

New technology and new media are inexorably linked to one another. Through the application of new technologies students can be active participants in new media. Over the course of their college careers and their entry into the work world, these tools may make the difference between being noticed or passed over.

References

Chun, W. and Keenan, T. (2006). *New media, old media*. Routledge. New York, NY.