7 Things You Need to Know about Collaborative Multimedia Boards

A white paper from Teaching and Learning with Technology at Penn State

1. What Are They?

In general, a collaborative multimedia board is an online space where participants are able to collect, consume, and edit data and then share it with the world. Some spaces are linear in nature, such as Prezi, and some are nonlinear, such as Spaaze and Glogster.

These cloud-based tools eliminate the need for special software and are mainly cross-platform, which allows equal participation for each student. Uses can range from the simple, like organizing a photo album, to the complex, like an interactive multimedia presentation.

2. Who’s Using Them?

Collaborative multimedia boards are becoming more popular in education. Teachers use tools like Spaaze as classroom bulletin boards to remind students of assignments and class announcements. Purdue University has created a wiki about Spaaze. This wiki goes in-depth on how Spaaze works and includes links to K-12 lesson plans as well.

Glogster enables students to make multimedia posters on the web. It is already a popular tool in K-12 schools, and even has education accounts for schools, called Glogster EDU. The popularity of this tool is evident via YouTube videos of interviews with students and teachers. In the videos, it is apparent that students really enjoy being creative and using multimedia related to the topic of their Glogster poster.

Prezi has become an alternative to PowerPoint for many students and educators. Through reading a Prezi message board, it is apparent that many K-12 and university educators are using this tool to engage students. Higher education institutions are using Prezi as well. A message board user with the handle Ptsnja had this to say about Prezi: “I am in a teacher training program at Concordia University in Montreal, QC...I use multiple platforms (Mac, PC, MS Word, OpenOffice, and so on) and Prezi is the only presentation software that consistently works on every machine, easily and quickly...I’m also fairly certain I’ve gotten better grades because my presentations were more engaging, lively, and clear because of the nonlinear aspects.”

Prezi is more than just an alternative to PowerPoint, however. Some are using Prezi as an interactive portfolio or resume.

3. How Do They Work?

Collaborative multimedia boards provide a user-friendly, media-rich, and team-oriented service by integrating various technologies including cloud storage, browser-based asynchronous processing, real-time synchronization, and OpenID, to name a few.

Cloud-based storage centrally stores the contents and provides users references to such resources as a Wikipedia entry, a news article, a research publication, a YouTube video, or any information available online. For example, users can embed a YouTube video in their e-mail without actually attaching the large video file.

Today's browsers have a sophisticated user interface and smooth workflow. Asynchronicity means users do not have to wait for the back-end synchronization to finish to continue working. For example, Gmail lets users continue to compose an e-mail while a large attachment is being uploaded in the background.

One example of real-time synchronization is multiple editors working on a document in Google Docs. When a user is editing one part of a document, other parts being edited can also be seen in real time. This significantly cuts down communication time.

OpenID addresses the inconvenience of each website requiring a user to sign in with a separate account. Websites supporting OpenID accept users’ existing accounts from other services to sign in.

By mashing up such technologies, collaborative multimedia boards provide users with an easy way to collaborate on a project in an intuitive drag-and-drop manner.

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By mashing up such technologies, collaborative multimedia boards provide users with an easy way to collaborate on a project in an intuitive drag-and-drop manner. For example, a
team may use Spaaze to collaboratively plan an event on a large virtual board. One user can write the marketing text on one part of the board and another user can drag and drop images and videos of past events around it, while yet another two users brainstorm on places to distribute the marketing literature. The ability to see each other's activities in real time helps produce a coherent result.

4. Why Are They Significant?

Collaborative multimedia boards allow users to create and edit boards online with other users either via real-time or asynchronous participation. There is no need to purchase specific software or special equipment. Students can easily access these creative collaborative environments without needing to be in the same geographic location or time zone, thereby providing an excellent and flexible alternative for online education. With the ability to incorporate multiple forms of media—videos, photographs, audio files, writing—students can choose to participate in ways they are comfortable with, which in turn offers them the opportunity to be introduced to and to explore other forms of media.

5. What Are the Downsides?

Each collaborative multimedia board offering has distinct benefits to the user, but there are some potential drawbacks that should be considered when choosing a tool. Spaaze, for instance, is a very free-form virtual corkboard that allows complete freedom when navigating and creating a document. For this very reason, Spaaze does not allow for an easy way to create a linear progression of information. Similarly, Prezi allows for a truly curated navigation of the collaborative space but would not be an ideal tool for developing a free-form environment.

Another consideration is the security and privacy of data placed on these cloud-based services. While it is becoming increasingly common to externalize the storage of academic data to third-party services like Google Documents, YouTube and the like, it does still have its risks as the safety of this data is being put into corporate hands.

A final security- and privacy-related consideration is the management of access to the collaborative space you choose. Some services require accounts to be created with them directly; others allow for linking of accounts from popular sites like Gmail—or you might consider creating a single account to be shared with all collaborators. Each has potential drawbacks ranging from the hassle of getting users to create accounts to not being able to determine who made what changes. Managing ease of setup versus control of usage is something to take into account after selecting a service.

6. Where Are They Going?

At this point, Prezi and Glogster have larger development teams than Spaaze, which is run by a single individual, and marketing agendas that include academic and corporate backing, as well as fee-based services. Prezi is the most sophisticated of the three platforms and markets its product as an elite tool used by creative leaders to exceed the status quo of presentations. Glogster is marketed to mainstream youth on three platforms and markets its product as an elite tool used by creative leaders to exceed the status quo of presentations. Glogster is marketed to mainstream youth on one platform, and to educators on its education platform, which has a different URL and enhanced functionality for managing user groups. Spaaze is marketed to the general public and has a “what you see is what you get” interface without extraneous advertisement or costs.

Since these services are relatively new, it is difficult to predict how they will develop within the near future. For these services to stay current, they should remain easy to use, flexible, and unique with regard to the services they provide to users.

7. What Are the Implications for Teaching and Learning?

Online collaborative tools like Spaaze help with student engagement and participation in a variety of ways. They allow students to build deeper relationships with one another while collaborating from a distance, which provides information from multiple contexts and points of view and allows open conversation. Since the tools are available 24/7, they increase participation outside of class, and as many students as needed can participate at any given point.

These tools also level the playing field for each student for two main reasons. Since they are free and totally online, they give each student equal access to the software. In addition, for shy students, the tools being online allow for a more passive participation. Finally, these tools enable the sharing of an incredible amount of data and personal experience. Users have compared them to traveling to another country.