Chapter 8
Google Docs in Higher Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It has been determined that students at the School of Education, University of Western Sydney (UWS) are widely spread throughout the Greater Western Sydney (GWS) region and that many have competing schedules due to being enrolled full-time in a course and having a full-time job (Martinez-Fernandez, Rerceretnam, & Sharp, 2006). This makes group assignments a time-consuming task, and in many cases, group work and collaboration does not occur in an optimal way. Recent research has discussed the case for wikis as collaborative learning tools in education, and some has explicitly focused on the use of wikis in completing group projects (Bold, 2006; Parker & Chao, 2007). However, the use of Google Docs in a tertiary educational setting remains largely unexplored in the literature; even though the collaborative features of wikis and Google Docs are relatively comparable. In this regard, the authors identified a potential use of Google Docs to improve group assignments, allowing the students to interact and collaborate online, thus enhancing their learning experience. They set up three different scenarios including nine lecturers (unit convenors and tutors) in order to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of including Google Docs within units taught at the School of Education. Preliminary data (collected over four consecutive semesters and featuring online survey responses of 963 students) showed a potential use of Google Docs to facilitate group assignments, to share information between students and academics, and to gather information via online surveys. The authors believe this powerful online application can be an excellent resource to overcome students' isolation and engage them in online knowledge construction.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

UWS has six campuses located in the Greater Western Sydney area (GWS) and a mission that links its activities to the development of the region. The University aspires to be a place, which creates positive change in the lives of its students and is a source of creativity and new knowledge, which is relevant, robust and contributes to individual and community development. Our vision is bringing knowledge to life in the GWS area through community and business engagement with our learning and research.

The GWS area is far from homogeneous; it is the most multicultural region in Australia. It is the first area of choice for refugees arriving in Australia from all over the world. Students attending UWS are widely spread throughout the GWS region (73% live in the area), which comprises 10% of the Australian population. One third of the population was born overseas, and half of the world's languages are spoken in the region. Half of our students are the first in their family to attend university. Classrooms are heterogeneous, including students who have just finished high school or a TAFE (Technical and Further Education) course, as well as mature-age students with a wide range of computer skills. The area encompasses many of the most seriously disadvantaged suburbs of metropolitan Sydney. In many cases, the students have tight schedules due to full-time work and full-time studies. Nevertheless, the GWS area has been identified as an area of great opportunity, diversity, challenge, and growth for future educators. Conditions prevalent in the GWS area challenge academics to develop educational alternatives to help students interact as a group and work collaboratively.

SETTING THE STAGE

The School of Education at UWS is strategically committed to making courses more flexible and further developing online learning environments, using technological tools in meaningful ways to engage future educators and to prepare them for their role in the 21st century classroom.

Following a strategic plan, which aimed to promote technological tools amongst academics and students, the School decided to appoint an e-learning officer with the responsibility of implementing good e-learning practices and embedding Web 2.0 tools and digital media resources across teaching units. The e-learning officer had built a strong relationship with 45 academics across two campuses (Penrith and Bankstown). This had a positive impact on the application of basic university e-learning standards and on the use of good website practices improving look and feel, information architecture, usability, and accessibility of the online units. This

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