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The Viability of Google Wave as an Online Collaboration Tool

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Collaboration is an increasingly important skill in academia. Not only are librarians expected to collaborate with one another within a single library, but there are also expectations of both intracampus and intercampus collaboration. While face-to-face and telephone meetings are often possible, there are times when everyone cannot be brought together in that way. Even if scheduling a single meeting is possible, follow-up meetings, especially recurring meetings, can be challenging to facilitate. This is when electronic collaboration becomes a more viable vehicle for conversations. In addition to well-known tools like e-mail and instant messaging, there are a few other options that might facilitate collaboration across both time and space.

Since Google first unveiled the Google Wave (http://wave.google.com) service in May 2009, there have been a lot of conversations, both face-to-face and online, about the project. While there was much excitement about Google Wave prior to its launch, it seems many people cannot explain what Google Wave is and what it does now that it is more readily available.

Google Wave presumes to be an alternative to e-mail, allowing people to communicate and share work in a totally online environment. But where e-mail messages cannot be altered once they have been sent, Google Wave messages (or waves) can be edited by all parties at any point, unless editing privileges are restricted within a message.

For instance, say you are collaborating on an article with a colleague. Were you to e-mail your colleague corrected figures, you would need to send an e-mail, which your colleague would then need to receive and integrate into a local document. With Google Wave, you can go into the wave (Google's term for the workspace/conversation/document created within Wave) and correct the figures yourself. The changes made would

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automatically be highlighted within the wave, showing all participants which information was updated. This type of functionality is already possible with any number of collaborative tools, like Google Docs or wikis. Google Wave takes things a step further, allowing users to embed content, making Wave more like a robust chat client than a word processor. Wave users can embed Google searches, links, and upload files.

Google Wave is not taking aim at online word processors so much as it seems to be targeting e-mail ("Better Ways," 2009). Google Wave proposes to make e-mail-like communication more effective by introducing the real-time element and the ability to collaboratively edit the shared waves. In certain respects, Google Wave also attempts to be a free alternative to Microsoft's SharePoint, a technology suite that facilitates online collaboration (Arnold, 2009).

Google Wave is not to be confused with Google Docs (http://docs. google.com), the Google-hosted Web-based suite of office productivity programs. Google Docs allows users to create and upload word processed documents, spreadsheets, and presentations, but also allows these items to be shared with specific users (or anyone at all), making online collaboration possible. Similar functionality can be accomplished by e-mailing a file around to certain people, but Google Docs allows an item to be edited online and centrally, without having to track document versions across computers. Google Docs is not the only online office productivity provider. Another comparable service is Zoho (http://www.zoho.com/), which provides similar functionality.

Google Wave is also not to be confused with a wiki, although there is some overlap in functionality. A wiki is an online page that can be edited by certain users (or any user, depending on permissions assigned). Changes made to a wiki are tracked so that a page can revert back to an earlier version. Changes are made within a Web browser; users do not need to download, edit, and upload HTML pages.

Wikipedia, the online collaboratively produced encyclopedia is perhaps the most famous and successful example of a wiki, but there are also sites that let individuals set up wikis for the purpose of collaboration. These wiki services, like PBWorks (www.pbworks.com) and Wetpaint (www.wetpaint.com), provide a centralized space in which users can collaborate. In the case of PBWorks and Wetpaint, the spaces can be open to all or only those invited.

While it is still a new service, anecdotally there have been a number of challenges associated with Google Wave. For one, it is still invitation-only, so there is no guarantee the people you wish to collaborate with will have access to an account. Google Wave accounts come with a certain number of invitations, but after those have expired, more are not necessarily issued to an account.

Another challenge has been the complexity of Google Wave, both in explaining what it does and why one should use it. There is no precedent for this type of service, so all users are starting from square one, with no real comparable tool to serve as a guide or frame of reference. For many new users, Google Wave solves a problem that does not yet exist.

The chat functionality seems to be what most separates Google Wave as a collaboration tool from services like Google Docs and wikis. While those tools seem to be conceptually based on reproducing a print document, Google Wave feels more like a chat room. This feel changes how one might use it. In fact, Peter Sefton (2009a) reviewed it as a collaborative document editor designed to output what he calls scholarly HTML and found it challenging to use. This is an especially interesting observation given Sefton's work on the concept of scholarly HTML; that is, scholarly material formatted in a way to optimize it for the online realm:

> So there is no way for most author manuscripts, which are commonly deposited in institutional repositories, to be turned into usable Web content, let alone with links to data and semantic-Web content. The best most authors could hope for with their version would be to convert it to a PDF and deposit in a repository, while the publisher can do much more with the article. (Sefton, 2009b)

Presumably Sefton expected Wave to present a way to develop scholarly HTML, but as Wave stands now, it did not seem to work for him as an HTML development tool at the time of his tests.

Google Wave's chat functionality allows it to work as a real-time chat tool, like any typical instant messaging client, but it also records and archives conversations, providing users with a transcript of conversations within a wave, even conversations for which the user was not present. This shows users everything said and posted within a wave, in the order in which it was "said." It's chat coupled with the versioning ability of a wiki.

Another interesting component to Google Wave is its ability to search other users' public waves. This gives Wave users the ability to find and join specific projects and conversations they might not otherwise be aware of. This is especially interesting if one considers this in terms of communities of practice:

> In the organization world these communities are very much focused on expertise, and are intended as social structures for sharing practice and practical knowledge. It is therefore embedded in the [community of practice] concept that [communities of practice] have the ability to cut across departmental or even organizational boundaries, and can provide learning (and teaching) opportunities to all levels of staff, of all ages and experience, in an informal manner. ("Preface," 2006)

Google Wave not only gives users a space for virtual discourse and collaboration but also provides a means for users to find these conversations and communities. Anyone can start a conversation over e-mail, but you need to know who to send an e-mail to. It can be challenging to find the e-mail address of someone with a shared interest but who you do not personally know. And even if one manages to find the e-mail address of a stranger, there is still no guarantee the stranger is interested in collaboration or conversation. Google Wave provides a way to find these strangers who are interested in conversations and collaboration (users not interested in either of these ideas can make their wave private) and participate within a community of practice.

Collaboration is an important skill within the worlds of libraries and higher education, and choosing a tool for collaboration is an increasingly complex prospect. Before deciding on the tool, one might want to consider what the final product of the collaboration will look like. If one is working toward a text document, one might wish to use a tool that is more rooted in the print metaphor, like an online word processor.

If one is more interested in producing a conversation or exchange of ideas, something like Google Wave could be helpful. And if one is interested in exchanging ideas with a wide range of people, a public wave could be a way to bring interested parties from disparate places into a single conversation, perhaps even transitioning from a community of practice into the development of a formal document of some kind. Of course, Google Wave is still a very new product and is still evolving. Functionality that exists today might not be available tomorrow. Presumably, functionality will be added over time, so it might not make sense to use it as a community tool unless the community is comfortable with ambiguity and a constantly changing learning curve.

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