



TLT RESOURCES

TLT WIRED

...with Edo Forsythe

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In this column, we explore the issue of teachers and technology—not just as it relates to CALL solutions, but also to Internet, software, and hardware concerns that all teachers face.

We invite readers to submit articles on their areas of interest. Please contact the editor before submitting.

TLT WIRED ONLINE: A linked index of articles can be found at:

<jalt-publications.org/tlt/departments/wired>

Editor's Note: Due to an influx of excellent ideas about using technology in education, the Editors have graciously allowed me to increase the size of the column in this and upcoming editions. The current edition highlights online collaboration tools for word processing and learning management—two rapidly growing areas in CALL.

Pedagogical affordances of two online document types

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Since they were first made available in 2007, online documents provided by Google Docs have become very common in both the office and in blended learning environments in which computer-mediated communication is utilized. Google Docs has maintained its prominence among other free online documents as well as

commercial word processors in general. Google Docs are often compared with products like Microsoft Word, as in Kovaleva (2011) and Hartley (2012).

EtherPads

Since 2010, numerous sites have provided word processing apps for online collaborative editing, most using EtherPad as the platform they are built upon. Some features of EtherPad have made it especially popular among educators

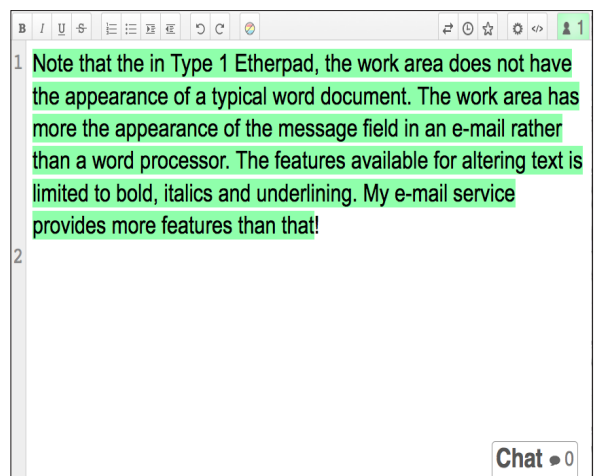


Figure 1. Type 1 EtherPad

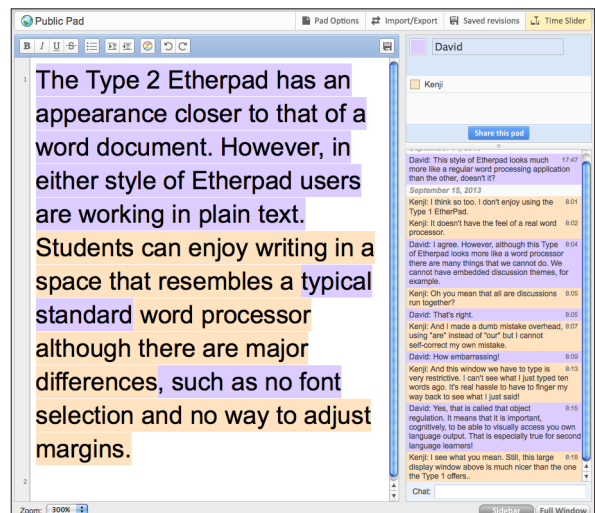


Figure 2. Type 2 EtherPad

(Pymm & Hay, 2013; Brodahl, Hadjerrouit, & Hansen, 2011; O'Hare, Quartermaine, & Cooke, 2011). However, EtherPad and Google Docs are quite different, and deciding which to use involves a tradeoff between pragmatic considerations and pedagogical affordances.

Sites that provide EtherPads include Framapad, Mozilla Pad, Pirate Pad, Primary Pad, Qik Pad, Titan Pad, and TypeWithMe. The process of choosing is simplified by knowing that there are only two types of EtherPads and the differences are largely cosmetic.

In a Type 1 EtherPad, the work area (see Figure 1) does not have the appearance of a Word document, but looks more like an email message field. A Type 2 EtherPad (see Figure 2) more closely resembles a Word document. However, in either type, text alteration is limited to bold, italics, and underlining (Floss Manuals, n.d.).

As students become comfortable using EtherPads, they often ask how to change the text font or import an image, and regrettably, they cannot. The variety of formats of text documents that can be imported varies from site to site. EtherPads generally claim to offer the ability to import Word and .rtf files but reliability is patchy. Furthermore, when importing text files, any previous work is written over and cannot be undone. Also, although EtherPad claims to be working on this, using EtherPads on the go via smartphone is currently not possible.

Google Docs

Google Docs by contrast has many of the features available in a standard word processor. A ruler at the top of the document can be used for adjusting left/right margins. There is an ample array of fonts, character sizes and text colors to choose from. Importing images and tables is simple. A Google Doc can be exported as a doc, docx, odt, rtf, pdf, txt, or html file much more easily than with EtherPads. Additionally, the Google Drive mobile app allows users to work on documents while on the go.

Comparison

What are the benefits of choosing EtherPad over Google? The first is convenience: To access a Google Doc, a student must have a Google account. Aside from ethical considerations, leading an entire class through the process of signing up for Google accounts is difficult. After students have signed up, they must request access to the

online document, which the instructor must then grant; or the instructor can enter each student's email address into the "Invite People" field of each document. Moreover, until students edit their account profiles, they will be identified within the document by their email addresses rather than their actual names. In contrast, an instructor can have an entire class working on EtherPad documents within one class period. Creating several EtherPads and distributing the appropriate URL to each group could take as little as 15 minutes.

A second advantage that especially appeals to educators is the Time Slider that enables a step by step view of students' collaboration. Google Docs have a Revision History that allows a similar function, but in "more detail" mode it often records non-events.

Yet another advantage is the authorial color feature of EtherPads. Each member of an EtherPad is assigned a different text color. This makes it easy for teachers to give an appropriate amount of credit to each student. Google Docs also feature authorial color view, but only in "Revision History" mode, and then only the most recent edits in a given edit frame are colored. In the following frame, previous work returns to black, making it easy to identify new edits but difficult to keep track cumulatively.

In view of these points, EtherPads would seem to be the obvious choice for educators. However, EtherPads have one shortcoming that makes all the other points trivial. A great deal of the learning in a collaborative assignment occurs during metatalk (Storch, 2010). However, the quality of students' metatalk is limited by the poor quality of the interface provided in EtherPads. The chat field in both Type 1 and 2 EtherPads is a narrow strip that does not expand as the user types. It limits users' view of what they are typing to several words, making object regulation—which is important for quality collaboration (Brooks & Donato, 1994)—difficult. In Type 1 EtherPads, the display window for past posts can be expanded, but students tend not to do so. Type 2 EtherPads do provide a larger display area for viewing past comments, but not for typing as it occurs.

Neither Type 1 nor Type 2 EtherPads support embedded discussion threads; this is a major shortcoming. Maintaining awareness of earlier topics is difficult and students tend not to continue prior discussions. I have observed that communication in the chat area of EtherPads is very much in the moment and lacks the depth of asynchronous communication. Moreover,

if a teacher comments on an earlier example of language use, that teacher-student talk is likewise lost in the roll and the opportunity for leading students to “notice the gap” is unlikely to be accessed.

Google Docs documents feature a Comments column and a Chat area so both synchronous and asynchronous communication are supported. Comments are linked to highlighted portions of the text. This limits free ranging discussion somewhat, but also makes it very easy for instructors to get students to attend to specific textual issues. Comment topics are embedded separately so that specific issues are easily located. The text field enlarges to accommodate the length of each post as it is typed, thus better facilitating quality metatalk and students’ object regulation of their own language output. Also, teachers can notify students by email of comments and responses relevant to them individually by typing an @ followed by a member’s name. Chat allows freer and more direct exchanges whenever students prefer to use simple and synchronous communication.

EtherPad, therefore, provides quick and easy-to-implement online editing, with some of the pedagogical advantages of online editing but a very limiting environment for fostering metatalk between students, or correction and L2 modeling by teachers. Google Docs offers everything that EtherPads do not, but only for the teacher with the time and patience to set up the document.

Some educators may feel that the level of synchronous communication supported by EtherPad is adequate. However, there are three other points to consider. First, while Google Docs have various privacy settings for viewing and for editing privileges, EtherPads have none. Anybody who has the URL can view and edit an EtherPad document. They can also engage in chat completely anonymously. Most sites assign each EtherPad a random ten-character URL and these are probably fairly secure. However, at least one of these sites allows visitors to freely enter and view other users’ documents. For teachers concerned with Internet safety, this is far from secure.

Second, EtherPad reliability during use is unstable and often disconnects without saving users’ inputted data. Brodahl, Hadjerrouit, and Hansen (2011) report that their study was adversely affected by poor reliability of EtherPads, and a forum discussion at TypeWithMe (2011) revealed similar disruptions involving three different EtherPad providers. Furthermore, during the writing of this article, while collaborating

in a shared Primary Pad document, three other persons and I were repeatedly disconnected and our writing was lost. Finally, once an EtherPad assignment is complete, it is difficult to delete the EtherPad, with different providers offering a variety of solutions.

The instructor’s selection of software will very much determine the way their students interact. If an instructor’s main focus is on work produced through collaboration, EtherPads may be more than adequate. Despite the negative points noted here, existing literature shows that many teachers have been satisfied with them. However, for instructors who wish to exploit the potential of quality metatalk, EtherPads are simply not up to the job. Teaching from the premise that the process of collaboration is as important as the product leads to a strong preference for Google Docs—a preference that I support. By implementing Google Docs into their courses, teachers not only provide an effective means of completing writing assignments, but also introduce students to a powerful collaborative tool that they may use on their own in future coursework and later in their professional lives.

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Edmodo: A Simple Tool for Blended Learning

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Edmodo <www.edmodo.com> is a free online learning management system that provides a private virtual space for students and teachers to share and discuss text, images, audio, and video. It has become a popular platform used in primary and secondary schools as well as universities in the U.S., but its functionality, ease of use, and cross-platform simplicity make it a good fit for EFL contexts at all levels as well.

Edmodo is accessible via web browser and/or a free smartphone app (iOS and Android). The user interface, common to all platforms, is simple and intuitive—similar to that of social networking sites such as Facebook (see Figure 1).

Edmodo communities are formed by teachers for specific groups of students—usually classes. Once a teacher creates an Edmodo group, he

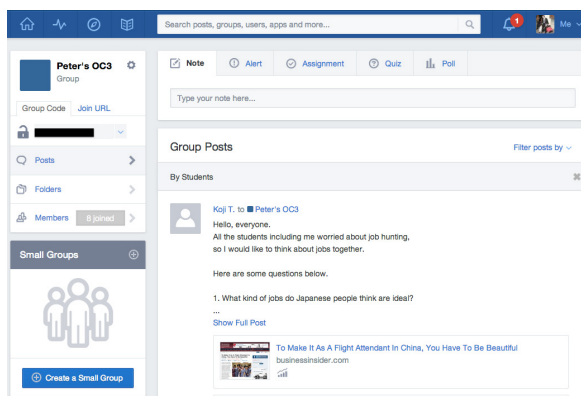


Figure 1. Screenshot of the author's Edmodo course page

or she receives a short code to give to students, which they use to join the group. This registration method has two benefits. First, it simplifies the process of student sign-up. Students do not need to input email addresses or other personal information to register with the site in order to participate. They just need the code they receive from their teacher. The second benefit is that students can choose their level of anonymity on the site. The registration process requires students to create a username and password for themselves, but does not require an email address or even a real name. And though Edmodo is secure and private, this feature helps alleviate concerns that might arise about the sharing of personal information on the Internet.

During a trial of Edmodo I did in a third-year university oral communication class in 2012, my students registered with their given name and the first initial of their family name. Many chose to register their email addresses as well because this allows students to receive notifications of activity on the class Edmodo site. Once users sign in, they are presented with a very simple “wall” of recent posts. This is the primary place where class activity on Edmodo takes place, so if students are able to sign in and scroll around a webpage, they have the digital literacy skills necessary to participate in a class on Edmodo.

Posts to the class wall, called “Notes”, may contain text and files for download, or web links to audio, video, or other online resources. Similar to posts on Facebook, notes automatically embed video links and provide previews of other types of media. All members of an Edmodo group have the ability to post notes independently or in response to other members’ notes. Notes can be posted to individual group members, the entire group, or to smaller discussion groups created by

the instructor. The instructor also has the ability to post quizzes, polls, assignments, and alerts to the whole group, or to individual students. Teachers can even time delay these posts—setting them to appear at specific dates and times in the future.

Files may also be placed in easily accessible shared folders organized by the instructor, or in Google Drive folders shared with the group and accessible through the Edmodo interface. A calendar feature allows the teacher to map out future assignments or class events for everyone to see, and Edmodo now also provides access to a wide variety of third-party apps that can be used within the platform. Many of these apps, such as dictionaries and class planners, are free.

The best way to get to know Edmodo and its features is to sign up and explore the user interface yourself to see what is possible. If you have more than one email address, you can add yourself as a student in a class you create to experience what students do when they use the system in a class. Overall, Edmodo is a simple, easy-to-use, multi-platform learning management system that provides useful tools for students and teachers to interact online outside of class.

Peter Hourdequin is an instructor of English in the faculty of foreign studies at Tokoha University. He is also a post-graduate researcher (part-time) in Lancaster University's department of Educational Research. The author has recently published a research article about using Edmodo in the language classroom entitled, "Promoting Student Autonomy with a simple online learning management system" in the journal, *Learning Learning*.

Editor's Note: Google Docs and Edmodo are growing rapidly and are being used by more and more educators every year. Their dynamic simplicity is their biggest selling point—that's why teachers seem to love them. Jim George recently tweeted a link to an Edmodo cheat sheet to help teachers get started using Edmodo in their classrooms; the cheat sheet and other helpful Edmodo tips can be found at <www.educatorstechnology.com>. Follow Jim George (@oyajimbo) on Twitter for great tips for making your classrooms *Wired!*



JALT FOCUS

JALT NOTICES

...with Malcolm Swanson

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Contributors are requested by the column editor to submit notices and announcements for JALT Focus by the 15th of the month, one and a half months prior to publication.

JALT FOCUS ONLINE: A listing of notices and news can be found at:

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Happy New Year!

At this writing it has been exactly one month since JALT2013 kicked off in Kobe. Many thanks again to the organizers, presenters, and attendees who made JALT2013, "Learning is a Lifelong Voyage", as enjoyable and educational as it was!

JALT2014, our 40th annual international conference, will be held in Tsukuba, and we are very excited about bringing our conference back to the Tokyo area again.

As you can see from the conference information on <jalt.org>, the deadline for the Call for Presentations for JALT2014 is 11 February 2014. Please polish up that proposal and send it in soon!

Another conference that I'd like to bring to your attention is PanSIG2014, which will be held 10-11 May 2014, in Miyazaki. The conference co-chairs, Hugh Nicoll and Joe Tomei, have come up with a very intriguing plan for the conference. Please go to <pansig.org> to find out more about the interactive presentations that will form the core of PanSIG2014. You'll also notice that the Call for Proposals deadline for PanSIG is 15 January 2014.

As Buzz mentions in her report for this issue's JALT Focus, the Senior type of membership was approved at the Ordinary General Meeting held at JALT2013. The vote turned out to be 1,040 "For" and 32 "Against", with 203 members abstaining. At the Executive Board Meeting in