

# Using Online Tools to Facilitate Communication, Interaction, and Collaboration

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Working together allows people to accomplish things that would be difficult if not impossible to achieve by working alone. It can reduce workloads, support networking, and expose people to new ideas and technologies. But for many language teachers in Japan, getting together with peers for research or projects is hampered by separation or conflicting schedules. When face-to-face meetings become impractical, online tools become essential channels of communication. Relying on these technologies, however, can pose challenges. The JALT2012 workshop “Engaging in Online Collaborative Projects” was held to allow teachers to share their online experiences working with others. By learning about the virtual technologies, group strategies and preventative measures other teachers have found effective, teachers could better plan for and manage their own future online interactive projects. In this paper 3 teachers will describe technologies they used to coordinate with peers on online projects, outline their experiences, and provide recommendations.

オンライン・コラボレーションは、共同研究のための技術的支援を行うことによる研究遂行の促進を目的としている。適切な分任による作業量軽減、ネットワーク化による情報共有の円滑化、アイデアや最新テクノロジーに触れる機会の増進が重要である。しかし、研究者（語学教員）達がしばしば遠隔地において異なるスケジュールで活動しているため、会合の場を設けることが容易でなく、主要な通信チャンネルとしてオンライン・ツールを活用することが望ましい。JALT2012ワークショップは、研究者達がオンライン・ツールの利用状況を発表しノウハウを共有するために開催された。実効性のある処方として提案されたのは仮想化技術、様々なコラボレーション戦略やトラブル防止手段等であり、これらによって共同研究プロジェクトの設計及び運用が改善される見込みである。本稿では語学講師3名が、共同研究のための実用化されたオンライン技術の紹介と提言を試みる。

**D**URING A JALT2011 presentation on quantitative research (Sholdt, 2011), the audience was invited to participate in an upcoming professional development project. The project was designed as an educational opportunity for English educators to learn about quantitative research while applying what they learned to complete a small, publishable research study on writing fluency in their own teaching contexts, based on a previous study by Bonzo (2009). The project, called the Writing Fluency Project (WFP), connected educators from all over Japan, including the authors of this article. The project was conducted completely online and provided a number of insights into the nature, challenges and possibilities of online tools in facilitating communication, interaction and collaboration. The larger group consisted of over 40 educators from various teaching contexts around Japan. The participants were connected through a Moodle site, while smaller discussion groups met independently online to

discuss readings and their evolving research projects. Because of the nature of the project, participants were exposed to a variety of online technologies, many of them for the first time.

In addition to the promised educational goal of learning about quantitative research and basic statistics, the WFP also demonstrated to us that working together with coworkers and peers on projects like research, professional development, and education, provides a multitude of benefits beyond what might be accomplished alone. For example, people bring different strengths and abilities that can be shared, not to mention the workload that is reduced by dividing labor. The others can help provide support and motivation when challenges arise and offer different viewpoints and perspectives. In addition, interacting facilitates networking, which can open educational, social and professional opportunities. This project brought into focus the large number of professionals who, due to limited term contracts and remote teaching locations, are working in isolation from the larger community of educators around Japan. Although JALT meetings and conferences offer excellent opportunities to make connections, arranging face-to-face interactions can be challenging. When we cannot meet physically, the use of online applications, tools, and resources offers an avenue for coordinating on projects remotely. Using online technologies, however, is certainly not without challenges.

What we learned about the uses, challenges and benefits of using online technology to work with people from various locations was valuable, but we felt there was a larger need and interest in the teaching community to learn about the exciting online technologies that can facilitate such virtual relationships, whether the goal of the relationships was to complete professional tasks, research projects, professional development, or various other projects that require working from remote locations. For this paper we employed a narrative style, as discussed in Barkhuizen (2011), to investigate and reflect on the different

experiences we have had with online technology. Each of us will (a) describe our early encounters with online technologies, (b) reflect on our individual perspectives of the WFP—Sholdt as facilitator and Stoute and Mull as participants, (c) introduce other technologies we have employed to coordinate with peers online and finally (d) give recommendations for readers hoping to utilize online technologies for their own goals and projects.

## Teaching in an Online Classroom

### Gregory Sholdt

#### *First Encounter*

My first significant experience with professional online interaction and collaboration began when I agreed to design and teach an online course on quantitative research methods for a group of language teachers interested in building their research skills and knowledge. I had been providing workshops and seminars at JALT chapter meetings and conferences but knew that the one-time contact with participants meant only limited instruction and learning could take place. At the end of one of my workshops, a teacher approached me with the idea of the online course, and while it was something I had never previously considered, I quickly saw the potential for moving in this direction and jumped at the chance. This eventually led to the development of the Writing Fluency Project as a means of promoting knowledge and skill in quantitative research methods among language teachers in Japan.

#### *Challenges and Successes*

The main technology needed to run a live online course is a video conferencing application that allows the instructor and participants to gather and interact live in an online space. In

different cycles of the course and other webinars, I have used WebEx, Blackboard Collaborate (formerly Elluminate Live!), and Adobe Connect, with each having similar features and monthly fees. These online applications allow me to set up an online “classroom” that is essentially a closed website which the course participants can be invited to join by sending them a link through email. After signing into the site, their names appear on a list of participants in a small window on the screen. With the use of web cameras, I can show six small video windows with live feeds from participants and one of me. I can upload and control presentation slides that all participants can see. Additionally, there is an open chat window that allows participants to type in questions while I am teaching. Although it is far from a traditional classroom, there is a great deal of interactivity available through these applications.

While the technology allows for an important level of interaction, there are some difficulties in adjusting to the unique online instructional situation. As I teach from my computer at home, I need to make sure that I am not interrupted by family members or even my cat and be careful not to leave personal items, such as laundry, behind me that can be visible on the screen. It is also a bit awkward to look into the camera lens on the top of my computer screen while teaching when it feels more natural to look at the video image of the participants. Unfortunately, the video windows are small and have low resolution, so while it is helpful to see faces, a lot of subtle facial cues that might help me to gauge confusion or comprehension are lost. With seven or eight microphones open at once at the teachers’ various locales, background noise can become a serious problem and participants are asked to keep their microphones off until needed. From experience with my online course, I learned that having one person serve as a tech assistant during each class is extremely helpful. Their job is to manage any issues that unexpectedly crop up so that the class can continue without interruption.

Outside of the web conferencing applications, I also employ other collaborative tools with the course and other research projects—in particular Google Drive and SurveyMonkey. Google Drive allows multiple users access to a suite of apps to jointly create and edit spreadsheets, documents, and presentation slides that are stored online. With the online course, I put homework questions on a Google document and have participants post their own answers as well as comment on others’ responses. It can get a little complicated with many contributors to a single document, but assigning a color to each participant helps to separate and identify different authors.

With SurveyMonkey, an online questionnaire development and data collection application, I can quickly create questionnaires and conveniently gather and organize information from the course or other research project participants. Getting people to respond in a timely manner can be difficult, but adding a hyperlink to the questionnaire and giving an estimate of time needed to complete the questionnaire do seem to help. A bit of planning at the questionnaire development stage goes a long way too when it comes to reviewing and analyzing your data.

### **Recommendations for Teachers**

Prior to working on the online course, I had just minimally used online applications for professional collaboration, but since that time, I now look at online interaction as a first, best option for the work and projects that I take on. For language teachers who have been apprehensive about online tools, I highly recommend jumping in and giving them a try. There is an astounding variety and number of useful applications out there that can open up new ways to collaborate professionally. I think it is important to be prepared for a learning curve and expect that there will always be limitations and compromises. Making a commitment to use a new application for at least a month is a good way to get over that initial hump. It is easy to get frustrated with what

does not work the way you want it to; however, try not to forget the advantages it brings. I still have quite a few frustrations when teaching courses online, but there is simply no way these courses or other new projects that I have started would even be possible without online collaborative technology.

## **Moodle: Technology and Community**

### **Martin Stoute**

#### **First Encounter**

My first experience using online technology in interactive activities was through a writing course I volunteered for while a BEd student at the University of Toronto in 2009 called Writers in Electronic Residence. K-12 students from across Canada are connected to a professional writer through FirstClass, a groupware technology. The professional writer commented on works of prose and poetry the students produced. Students also commented on the works of other students. BEd candidates like me provided feedback and encouragement. It was impressive to the students to have their work taken so seriously, and I remember their thoughtful online discussions, but I had minimal interaction with the different features of FirstClass and did not realize the power and range of the technology.

#### **Challenges and Successes**

By joining the WFP, I embarked on the most ambitious virtual group project I had ever been a part of. At the start of the WFP, Sholdt had all members sign into a Moodle site, which would serve as our online meeting place for the duration of the project. It was there that we would access our readings, ask questions, retrieve documents, and engage in dialogue. We were encouraged to quickly create a profile with a digital photo, and I recognized a few faces from Sholdt's JALT workshop. To develop social pres-

ence, Sholdt placed us into smaller groups of four to six people who could meet online regularly to share insights and raise difficulties. As a “non-tech” guy engaging in an online project, I quickly suggested a Skype introduction. The group, however, displayed a reluctance to interact online and it became clear that it would be difficult to establish a working relationship with them.

Like all participants, we were linked to the project through Moodle, so I had somewhere to fall back to. Navigating the Moodle site, however, proved a challenge. My limited computer skills, combined with a lack of patience with computers, made finding the right forum sections and documents frustrating. I got lost easily and found the layout and labeling confusing and counterintuitive. All the navigating options were text-based, and as I was used to typical graphical user interface (GUI) icons like those on a Mac or Windows system, this was a small hang-up. Also, there was so much information on the main page that it took up multiple computer screens of scrolling to reach the bottom, which I only later discovered contained the schedule.

To blame my difficulties solely on the setup of the project's Moodle site would be an overstatement. I was irrationally hesitant to contribute to or interact with the larger Moodle group “out there”. Perhaps because I had not met most participants—and despite acquaintance with their profiles—I did not fully register that they were people similar to me. As time went on, I did not know whether I was keeping up with others in the weekly readings and was concerned I might be missing important information on Moodle. Rather than encouraging me to solicit advice from the larger community on the many forums, these factors combined to discourage me from stepping forward. Based on my connections with some of the others in the project, I found that I was not the only one who was apprehensive about posting ideas and questions.

Because my small groups ultimately never thrived, I had no recourse but to face my demons and make a stronger effort to

figure out the Moodle website. Through trial and error, I soon gained navigating competence, discovering where to find the weekly schedules, webinar links, and relevant forums. After overcoming my technical inhibitions, I began to post and worked with members in trying to solve common problems. Embracing the larger community showed me how fortunate I was to have such a good online meeting space to fall back on since my smaller team had fallen through.

### **Recommendations for Teachers**

I learned that when working with large collaborative groups online, it is important to jump in right away, especially for those who are working in isolation outside a supportive work or teaching environment. Doing this will help collaborators make the social connections that will bind or tether them to the group. Whether by commenting on profiles or responding to forums, once there is interaction going on it feels more human and natural. It is also important for administrators to offer multiple points of entry to the online community and for participants to experiment with all of them. Whether it be online forums, blogs, audio-video conferencing, or even physical face-to-face meetings, all of these provide a link to the larger collective. Finally, I would strongly urge those who do not consider themselves “tech-savvy” to take the leap and just give new programs and technologies a real try. Technology can be intimidating and frustrating, but with a little persistence benefits soon begin to appear.

## **Moving Meetings and Projects Online**

### **Jacqueline Mull**

#### **The First Step**

My first real online experience working with others in an educational setting was an online writing course I mediated for Waseda University from my teaching position in the United States. The experience was a sterile one, with students reading instructions and writing models online before submitting their own writing to me for correction and grading. It was hard to imagine a real person on the other end of the email address and I know my students felt the same way. The dropout rate was high. While those students who stuck with the program showed improvement in their writing, the online program did not feel as rewarding as a traditional face-to-face class. In the years that followed I became more technologically skilled, but was hesitant about online projects.

#### **Challenges and Successes**

Before taking part in the WFP, I had only used Skype for personal calls and video chats with individual family members. As part of the WFP, we needed to organize regular meetings with a small group (four to five people) located around Japan. The purpose of these small group meetings was to discuss readings and our developing research projects in a more intimate setting, where our questions and concerns would be heard and would be more likely to be addressed. Both Skype and Google + were recommended as formats for these group meetings. My group chose Skype simply because of familiarity with the software. Unfortunately, the standard, free version of Skype, unlike Google +, does not allow group video conferencing unless one member pays for a premium account. We could, however, forego video and simply set up an audio conference call, which turned out to be adequate for our purposes.

Establishing our first meeting by email turned out to be a headache with multiple volleys of email over several weeks to find a common time in our schedules. In retrospect, something like BaseCamp, described later, or perhaps simply Google Calendar may have saved us time organizing our schedules. It did appear that groups who scheduled an initial contact time quickly were more likely to persist in the project than those who did not. After initial contact was made, all future meetings were scheduled in real time at the end of each meeting.

Once our small group made initial contact, we proceeded in much the same way described by Johnson, Suriya, Won Yoon, Berret, and La Fleur (2002). One member stepped forward as an initial leader as we tried to determine how best to proceed with the project at hand, and from that initial meeting on, leadership rotated. In order to get the most out of our Skype meetings, we took notes on our assigned reading individually, shared and commented on those notes by email before our meetings, and harvested difficult points from the developing email discussion as the focus of our Skype meetings. This kept meetings short and focused so we could discuss the most difficult points within our self-imposed 30-minute time limit. Our more persistent problems were posted to the Moodle forum for help. This process encouraged everyone to finish the reading early, and group members only occasionally came to meetings unprepared. Interestingly, unlike the situation described in Johnson et al. (2002), leadership did not rotate based on the weekly note-taker (our note-taker, who did rotate, tended to be less involved in the conversation because of their task) but rather around team members who had either posed problems in the email conversations or felt they might have an answer to a problem that had been posed.

One challenge to using Skype was turn-taking. Without a visual connection, group members were at risk of falling silent and forgotten as more aggressive members dominated the

conversation. One team member made an early effort to monitor for members who had fallen silent and check in with them. This kept everyone involved and often brought out interesting problems and comments that might have gone unsaid otherwise. This dynamic made all team members more sensitive to participation and contributed to a strong sense of community. In the end, this sense of community was a highly motivating force and made the overall educational experience that much more rewarding.

In addition to the online technologies we used to an educational end for the WFP, I have also used project management technologies online for professional projects. A few years back, my colleagues and I were hired to write textbooks for another institution in Tokyo. Suddenly we had to coordinate with a remote client, and we also needed to coordinate with materials writers who were outside the Kansai area, in order to meet our deadline.

To address these challenges, we started using an online project management system called BaseCamp (Classic version). The user interface is designed with business teams in mind. It provides a calendar to post events and milestones, an internal message system, an option for posting documents online, and online To-Do lists. Administrators can give outside groups, such as clients, tailored access to the site, while giving different access to team members. At the time we started using this software there was a basic, free version of the software. Unfortunately, that is no longer the case, and BaseCamp now costs at least U.S. \$20/month.

Aside from a very intuitive user interface, we discovered other features we enjoyed about this software. The To-Do lists allowed team members to check in quickly with people working remotely to see what was getting done throughout the day. This made it possible to coordinate with remote contract workers and for our core team to work outside the office while keeping

connected to the project. Another unexpected but key feature of BaseCamp was the milestone feature on the group calendar, which required a name associated with every project milestone. This removed any confusion about who was responsible for a project and also put pressure on group members to finish projects on time so they would not be responsible for an overdue milestone on the homepage. The public nature of the milestones plus the satisfaction of checking them off when work was complete turned out to be highly motivating for our team.

Had we been willing to pay a monthly fee, we could have used BaseCamp to upload and share documents, but the free version had very limited space and our textbook chapters were too heavy for BaseCamp or email, so we chose to use Firestorage (free online) for sharing documents instead. Firestorage, like Dropbox, allows users to upload documents to the Internet and share them with others. In my own opinion, Dropbox is more flexible than Firestorage, but Firestorage is straightforward, presented in Japanese, and was already used by some of our colleagues.

### Recommendations

My more recent experiences with online education and project coordination have made me reconsider my early skepticism about coordinating with others online. I do find that learning a new technology often comes with bumps, but there are some concrete steps that can be taken to improve the experience. For discussion-focused interactions, it is important to establish contact quickly and monitor for quieter members. It is also highly recommended that a strategy be adopted for keeping meetings short and to the point. This may be accomplished by co-constructing an agenda ahead of time, agreeing on a self-imposed time limit, or doing both. For online project management, it is important to find avenues for keeping members organized and motivated, including having public goals and attaching names

to mutually agreed-upon deadlines. To promote adoption of new technologies, it is valuable to have incentives, such as centralized information and public recognition of accomplishments. No matter what previous experiences with software or online interaction readers may have had, I highly recommend taking online opportunities seriously. As technology develops it is becoming an ever more compelling facilitator for connecting with others.

### Conclusion

The “Engaging in Online Collaborative Projects” workshop (Stoute, Mull, & Sholdt, 2012) was a way of getting people together to discuss what group projects they were doing and learn from each other. Given the advantages of working with others rather than in isolation, the importance of online technologies that facilitate communication, interaction, and collaboration played a large role in the discussion. Thanks to the development of new technologies, many of which we discussed, online communication is relatively inexpensive, widely accessible, and potentially very effective in facilitating online group projects. But as our experience illustrates, project success does not magically occur when you give a group of people the relevant hardware and software and tell them to begin. Some participants may be confused about how to use some or many features of the technology or may simply feel awkward when doing so. It is therefore important to pay attention to the human element in online collaborations to maximize the opportunities for participants to productively connect with each other and to anticipate problems before they happen so that they may be avoided. This can be achieved by monitoring for quiet group members, scheduling early online introductions, and requiring participants to provide photographic representations. It is also helpful to encourage and support members to persist with the technology. Once a group coalesces, armed with useful and objective-appropriate online

tools, there is enormous potential for knowledge creation, problem solving, creative output, and project success.

Trying these technologies for yourself is an essential step in beginning to harness their power to facilitate and enhance online educational projects, professional projects, and relationships. By sharing our experiences of working with these technologies and working with other educators in our JALT2012 workshop, we hoped to create a forum that other educators would find valuable.

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