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Betwixt and Between Collaborative Online Spaces: Editing and Publishing a Collection of Essays

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For the past year, my co-editors and I collaborated online as we went through the workflow of editing a collection of essays on the topic of “Generation X” experiences of librarianship.¹ While two of us live in the same region—the Southeast—we are separated by 283 miles. Driving six hours one-way to discuss editorial decisions that can be handled more efficiently, and on the cheap via free online collaboration tools was not an option. The fact that the third member of our editorial team lived 1,056 miles north was also a consideration. We discussed meeting at conference of the American Library Association, but schedules were tight and not everyone could attend the conference. To deal with these factors, we explored several online tools that could allow us to collaborate on our project and bring it to fruition: Wikispaces, Manymoon, Google Wave, DimDim, and Google Docs.

Wikispaces

As we refined our call for contributions, our first exchanges were limited to email until one of our co-editors set up an account on Wikispaces through which we drafted the final version of our call. Wikispaces hosts wikis for over five million users and meets the needs of both teachers in classrooms and CEOs in boardrooms. Librarians have used wikis for collaborating on bibliographies, instructional materials, and other projects.² Wikispaces provided an area in which my co-editors and I could collaboratively tweak our initial call until we achieved a final version. Users of wikis have dashboard, mail, and settings tabs that appear after a successful login. As with any wiki, we could review changes and revert to previous versions when amendments were unsuitable. Besides using the space for collaboration on refining our call, the space allowed us to create pages

and upload files. The latter was most helpful as proposals arrived in my inbox. My role as the co-editor who corresponded with potential authors necessitated that I upload each proposal to our Wikispaces area where it was accessible to the other co-editors. This method of sharing online space to house documents alleviated inbox confusion and file management issues that crop up with any project of this type.

Manymoon

After gathering proposals in Wikispaces, we determined that a Google search would reveal their contents which compromised our project and potentially violated our contributors’ privacy. Likewise, any editorial comments made about proposals were visible to anyone. We did not wish to upgrade to the “premium service” for \$5 per month, though, on the whole, this is a minimal fee to ensure confidentiality. We sought an alternate means of working with the proposals in a closed system. I previously had used Manymoon to manage an ongoing project and suggested that it might resolve the confidentiality problem we had with Wikispaces. Manymoon is a free project management program available on the internet that touts itself as a “social productivity” tool. Librarians are productive; in a sense, they exemplify Newton’s First Law of Motion: a body in motion tends to stay in motion. As Lori Wamsley suggests, their organizational skills are regularly called upon to manage projects as job descriptions require librarians to possess such skills.³ Project management tools, like Manymoon, can serve librarian skills in that area. Once I created the “Gen X” project, I added my co-editors as members of the project and engaged tasks such as “post and advertise CFC.” Once a task is “opened” and assigned to a person, that



person receives notification via email allowing them to view and complete the task. In theory, each author who contributed an essay to the book could have been added to the project. When added to the project, they could upload their final essay to Many-moon. This option has its positives. Since project administrators set due dates and Many-moon notifies contributors of various deadlines as they occur, rather than having the editor individually email contributors, the system does this automatically. Opening and setting up tasks allows the project manager also to assign the task to one or more individuals, and add comments for the assignment. Most importantly, though, Many-moon collected our documents in a closed-system. Once uploaded into Many-moon we commented on each proposal, viewed and responded to the comments of our co-editors. However, the inability to comment within the documents added more work as we explored methods to “work around” Many-moon. We chose not to have contributors upload their final essay to Many-moon because there was no real-time option for collaborative editing.

Google Wave

Although we abandoned Many-moon, my co-editors liked it despite some aspects being confusing at first. That brought us to Google Wave. With co-editors being game for anything, we tried another collaborative tool, but found it lacking in many respects for our purposes. Librarians, however, could tap into its capacity for communication and collaboration in other types of projects.⁴ In using this too, we created a “wave” for the project and scheduled a live chat. I uploaded our draft essays into Wave so that we could open, comment on, and collaboratively edit each document. It was good theory in theory, but the main problem with the practice was that I was the only one of the editors using Google Chrome. My co-editors were using Firefox and Internet Explorer but Google Wave works best with Chrome. My co-editors could not download any of the files nor were they interested in changing browsers to accommodate the

program’s specifications. Consequently, as they tried using Wave, their computers crashed. We pulled the plug quickly on this adventure and nursed our collaborative sea-sickness.

DimDim

At this point, I emailed all the draft essays to my co-editors and we proceeded the old fashioned way: we read the essays, took notes, made corrections using the Microsoft Word “reviewing” functions, and then emailed our “notes for revisions” to each other. We also teleconferenced weekly using DimDim, a product one co-editor successfully had used previously. The majority of our editorial workflow occurred via email, but we wanted to hear each others’ voices and to engage more spontaneously in conversation regarding the project. In DimDim, someone sets up a meeting and invites attendees. Attendees receive email notification of the event along with a link that they should click at the scheduled time. DimDim provides a 1-800 telephone number that all parties use to connect to the teleconference. Participants can share their desktops with one another, show presentations, and collaborate in real time.⁵ We actually never used DimDim for the desktop sharing, but having this option was reassuring. Though DimDim served our needs, I was eager to explore and compare another programs available facilitating collaboration.

Google Docs

We discussed using Skype, Adobe Connect, or Elluminate for our needs, but at this late stage in our project, the need for communicating via telephone or sharing desktops diminished as we entered the waiting phase – waiting for authors to return their revisions and for a publisher to accept our proposal. As it turned out, our very last minute sharing was confined to Google Docs, which, in retrospect, I believe we should have investigated sooner. Google Docs has capabilities for uploading files – texts, spreadsheets, presentations, drawings and forms – from a desktop, accessing these



documents from any computer or smart phone connected to internet, and having real-time collaboration with project partners. It also has a good web-based orientation to its functionality. Though we used only its most basic features, the variety of tools users can implement in their collaborative work make it a strong contender.⁶

Conclusion

Our openness to exploring emerging technologies that might meet our collaborative editorial needs gave us the opportunity to try Wikispaces, Monymoon, Google Wave, DimDim, and Google Docs. As we tested each, we determined strengths and weaknesses, and consequently used each in limited ways. Throughout the project, we sought collaborative tools, yet were disappointed that our searched failed to yield one tool that met the all needs of our project. While each program had enough features to recommend them, bouncing between several was inefficient and hampered our overall productivity on the project. Through trial and error we collaborated our way to a published book. Finding collaborative tools online is exciting, but determining the best one for a project may take some time and experimentation. Hopefully this brief overview will provide a head start.

Endnotes

¹ Martin K. Wallace, Rebecca Tolley-Stokes and Erik Sean Estep, eds., *Generation X Librarian: Essays on Leadership, Technology, Pop Culture, Social responsibility and Professional Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011).

² Nancy E. Garmer, "Introducing SRRT40 on Wikispaces.com." *SRRT Newsletter* no. 168 (September, 2009): 9; Shondra Brisco, "Which Wiki Is Right for You?" *School Library Journal* 53, no. 5 (May 2007): 78-9; Charles Allan, "Using a Wiki to Manage a Library Instruction Program: Sharing Knowledge to Better Serve Patrons," *College & Research Libraries News* 68, no. 4 (April 2007): 242-4.

³ Lori H. Wamsley, "Controlling Project Chaos: Project Management for Library Staff," *PNLA Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 5-6, 27.

⁴ Melissa Rethlefsen, "Google Wave: Collaboration Reworked," *Library Journal* 135, no. 1 (January 2010): 32-3. Note: Google Wave is no longer being developed as a stand-alone product.

⁵ DimDim was acquired by Salesforce in January, 2011, a move that may involve a fee-based rather than open access model.

⁶ Kathy Frederick, "A Gaggle of Goodies from Google," *School Library Media Activities Monthly* 25, no. 4 (December 2008): 44-6.