

Tracking Collaboration

Multidisciplinary

As teachers, we use a project-based approach to learning that requires students to work in small or large groups.

If we expect students to communicate their work and collaborate with one another then we need to assess how they do that. When they use overt methods such as using the discussion tab in wikis, copying the teacher in e-mails, using a discussion board, or communicating within a wiki itself, the teacher is able to assess something that was once intangible—collaboration.

Online productivity suites, such as Google Docs, provide students with a word processor, a spreadsheet, and presentation software. Students can begin their work at school and continue at home or anywhere they can get online. Students can work collaboratively on the same document at the same time. The files remain essentially private (shared only among the students) until they are finished. At that point, one student will either e-mail the teacher a PDF version or share the document to the teacher's account.

Subscribing to many of these online tools requires a valid e-mail account. Our school provides student e-mail, giving them another way to communicate with other students. E-mail can be an effective way for students to send messages and keep track of their work, but one problem is the wait time for a response. A student might send a message right after school, but the student's partners might not be free until later. By the time a classmate responds, there may not be time for students to adequately discuss or make changes to their work.

Texting is a faster option, and a large number of students have cell phones. However, students cannot give enough detail in their texts to be effective. Chatting becomes a better way for students to communicate in real time. We use homework chats at scheduled times using a tool that is integrated into our classroom management system. Only students in our class can join the chat. Chatting programs often create an archive of messages, which is e-mailed to the teacher. The problem with this type of communication is that it is synchronous, requiring everyone to be online at the same time.

Wikis give students a different way to work on assignments, and they may be the most effective communication tool. Although wiki pages can be private, we typically keep them open for all to see. Students work on their wiki site to track and report assignments in much the same way they would use a word processor. It is much easier for the teacher to track what each student is contributing. The wiki will record each update to a page and include an optional site administrator change notification option. It keeps a record of every page saved, and the teacher can easily review it. Students can work from anywhere where there is a computer with an Internet connection, so they do not have to be in the same physical place to collaborate. Wikispaces offers a discussion board for each page, allowing students to discuss their work separately from the product they create, giving the teacher an easy way to track discussions.

Microsoft Office programs, although not as flexible as wikis, allow users to track changes as well.

Each method described here allows students to demonstrate their contribution to the teacher. Recently Ben's AP Physics students worked on a joint project with the AP Government students. Although it is likely that the students knew each other, most of the students did not share common schedules. The assignment required students to work in a group comprised of students representing both classes. Their task was to communicate how government and science are related. One group chose to focus on Ben Franklin, and another group examined both the science and politics of the Atomic Age. They established a wiki for the groups to use and required that all collaboration be visible. Each group chose to communicate in a different way. One group used the discussion board in the wiki, while another used the wiki, itself, to keep a running list of what they had done and what they needed to complete. A third group used e-mail, and the final group used a combination of all three, including evening synchronous chats. Some groups used the wiki as their final project, while others made their own webpage, which was posted on our website.

We understand the importance of requiring students to use communication tools to collaborate on their work. These skills will translate to a new way of working and will increase productivity. As teachers, we must encourage students to use the devices appropriately. Students are developing their own written language for texting that is appropriate for their friends, but not necessarily for the classroom. Instead of complaining about the erosion of their writing skills, we need to guide students to use an appropriate

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style according to the medium and context. By helping our students become more effective communicators, we are helping them grow into global contributors.

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