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SharePoint Collaboration: Streamlining the Dissertation Process for Online Students

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Abstract: In the era of Web 2.0, document editors and collaborative workspaces have emerged. Primary functions of online collaborative workspaces include the ability to create a documents and document libraries online for others to view and collaborate and share document resources; thus, simplifying and streamlining projects that require collaboration. SharePoint is one such collaborative workspace. SharePoint is a server that has allowed for the simplifying and streamlining of the dissertation process for online students. The use of the various features of SharePoint for collaboration on dissertations are discussed. Benefits of using SharePont are outlined.

Introduction

With the emergence of online doctoral programs, faculty have been challenged to identify technologies to facilitate mentorship and collaboration with doctoral candidates through the dissertation process. A multitude of Web-based technologies have traditionally supported this process; technologies that have supported educational instruction and collaboration have included e-mail, discussion forums, and content management systems (Hew & Knapczyk, 2007; Kelly, Gale, Wheeler, & Tucker, 2007). In some cases, candidates have obtained dissertation-related content provided by the university via a content management system. Discussion forums or bulletin boards have been used for discussion purposes; however, most typically, doctoral committees and candidates have exchanged documents and information via email. This email-based workflow has classically consisted of individuals exchanging the document with tracked changes and comments until all track changes and comments have been addressed and then removed.

This workflow can pose obstacles and challenges. Lost emails and documents or delayed document exchange and responses can result in frustration and feelings of isolation (Doherty, 2006; Meyer, 2003). Since only one individual may work upon the manuscript at a time, other individuals may have to wait to respond or for a response before proceeding in his or her work. This could result in limited participation and interaction from all committee members, negative attitudes, and dissatisfaction. This may hinder or disrupt the dissertation process. As feelings and frustration in the online environment have been shown to result in attrition, analogously, such feelings may result in a candidate's failure to complete the dissertation process (Stodel et al., 2006).

In the era of Web 2.0, a variety of technologies have emerged providing faculty with the opportunity to use the Web as a "platform" for collaborative contribution and participation, collective intelligence, transformation of data, and the usage of multiple connected components(O'Reilly, 2005). In this era, collaborative Web-based workspaces have emerged. Functions of online collaborative workspaces include but are not limited to the ability to

create a document for others to view online, the ability to have multiple editors for a document at the same time, and the ability to share document resources, and track progress on a task. Thus, tasks that require online collaboration, such as the dissertation process, are simplified and streamlined.

Microsoft Office SharePoint is an online collaboration workspace and content management server that has allowed for the streamlining of the dissertation process for online students and faculty. SharePoint has numerous features and capabilities; programmers may even program applications for special needs; however, these practitioners will focus upon the basic features and capabilities of SharePoint that, through practice and experience, they have found useful and beneficial to facilitate the dissertation process. They will also discuss the challenges of using SharePoint and guidelines for practice.

SharePoint Features

When creating a dissertation workspace using Microsoft Office SharePoint (SP), the developer can choose to use a variety of templates. To setup a basic Windows SharePoint workspace for the dissertation process, the default site template, called the Team Site template, may be sufficient. The basic template includes both document libraries and basic lists (e.g. announcements, contacts, links) and has features that allow educators and candidates to manage content, to share files, to collaborate, and to organize information. These practitioners have used both the Team Site template and developed their own templates to serve as sites for collaboration on dissertations.

File Sharing

SP, specifically the document library feature, provides a medium for document sharing, storage, and retrieval. In simplest terms a document library is a collection of files. Depending upon permissions, a candidate or committee member can create a document library for a specific aspect of the dissertation project (e.g., proposal, IRB, etc.) and any person on the dissertation team can share, store, or retrieve any type of file in the library. Settings can be activated that can allow for check-in and check-out of documents, versioning history of documents, alert that a document has been revised, and other custom properties for documents. For example, one of the practitioner's dissertation candidates created a document library for the purpose of writing a proposal defense. The candidate would upload a manuscript with the check-in/check-out feature, the versioning feature, and the alert feature to the document library. When the candidate uploaded a document, all the committee members received email alerts. At the convenience of the committee member, he or she could access SP, check out the document, and provided feedback. The checking in and out feature ensured committee members were not editing the document simultaneously and providing duplicate feedback. When a committee member finished editing, another alert would be sent informing the committee and candidate of a new version of the manuscript and the need for additional editing. Versions were saved within the library for easy reference when needed. Picture libraries, similar to a document library, is a collection of pictures. This may or may not be useful based upon the dissertation; however, one candidate found the creation of a picture library useful for saving a collection of screen shots from her dissertation research in a MUVE.

Collaboration

Threaded discussions, shared calendars, and task lists are additional features that assist in online collaboration and productivity during the dissertation process. Announcements enable a candidate or committee members to post news or status. For example, one candidate announced, "I received IRB approval and am starting to execute my research." Calendars or event lists enable the tracking of important dates for everyone. Practitioners often enter dates for proposal defense, dissertation defense, and final IRB submission before the summer break. A convenient feature of the SP calendar is that it is compatible and can be linked with individual Office Outlook calendars. Task lists are useful for assigning and for keeping abreast of the progress of tasks. Tasks can be assigned both due dates and priorities. For example, after proposal defense in which the candidate was given approval with revisions, the candidate may be assigned the task of completing the required revisions in 30 days and the chair may be submitting proposal paperwork to administration within 10 days of the defense. Finally, discussion boards are a medium for conversing about issues or topics of interest. One of the practitioner's candidates started a discussion about the inability to gain permission from a university to conduct research and requested that the committee brainstorm alternative locations to conduct research.

Automated workflow

Workflow is another SP feature that is useful in the dissertation process as it allows for specific items to have rules and actions associated with them. Workflows can be created for individual items and processes such as reviewing, giving approval or disapproval, archiving, creating tasks, and sending automated notifications. For example, in the dissertation process, one practitioner usually applies a workflow to the dissertation manuscript; the purpose of the workflow is to automate the writing, revising, and approving process. The manuscript stored in a document library is assigned a workflow. When the manuscript is uploaded by the candidate, a notification e-mail is sent to the chair to inform him or her that the manuscript needs to be reviewed. Simultaneously, a review task list is created for the chair. Once the chair reviews the manuscript, he or she can mark the task as complete and assign a status – Rewrite, Major revisions needed, Approved to send to committee with minor revisions, etc. – this triggers another task list and email based on the status selected by the chair. This process continues until a final approval for defense is given by the chair and committee members.

Meetings

An additional site that can be created for the purpose of collaboration is the Meeting Workspace site (another SP template). This can be created as a sub-site of the dissertation team site, for a Meeting Workspace site is useful for centralizing information and materials for a meeting, or in this case a proposal or dissertation defense. Before the defense, the manuscript, the presentation, and all necessary documents that need signatures can be uploaded to the site. During the defense or immediately following, minutes can be noted and decisions made can be outlined. This creates a permanent documentation of the meeting and items discussed and decided.

Meeting Workspace site and team sites templates are useful; however, customization of sites is an additional option and is useful for some individuals and universities. Built-in Web Part features, "a modular unit of information that forms the basic building block of a Web Part Page," these practitioner have found, make customization of sites doable for individuals without programming and Web development expertise. Using Web parts, an individual can add lists, images, texts, and other content. The Web parts can be connected and configured to create unique pages for unique needs.

Conclusion

SP, used for the purpose of streamlining the dissertation process, has strengths and weaknesses. In the experience of these researchers, the primary usage limitations have been technical in nature. Educators and candidates' learning curve depended upon technology competence and the activities completed within SharePoint. For the neophyte technology user, time and training is needed to learn how to effectively navigate SharePoint. The practitioners have found that the development of tutorials and customized instructions assisted users in quickly acquiring basic navigation skills. Individuals who are readily familiar with technology, specifically Microsoft office products, found basic navigation relatively easy and tutorials unnecessary. Advanced skills for the development of the SharePoint sites require significantly more time and ability than skills for basic navigation and use. Published tutorials and published books have assisted with this task. Where available, IT support and developers can develop SharePoint sites for educators and students desiring to use it in the dissertation process; this is highly recommended. In using SP and working with faculty to establish SP dissertation sites, the practitioners recommend the following:

- Structure sites simply and for easy, intuitive navigate making it more likely for everyone to use an environment.
- Provide trainings before use to avoid the need for unnecessary, duplicate technical support.
- Leverage MS Office integrations in which everyone is familiar.

An additional challenge of using SharePoint, although not encountered by these practitioners, especially in this context, is related to the culture within the Higher Education institution. In higher education, territorialism and competiveness are often valued and even encouraged via policies for promotion and tenure. Thus, since SP promotes the sharing of information, the software could be devalued and individuals may be apprehensive to use it. Finally, since SharePoint is usually housed on an intranet, gaining access for external committee members can be challenging and has to be coordinated with the university IT department.

Despite limitations, in the experience of these practitioners, SharePoint helps overcome the following problems often encountered in the online dissertation process:

- Disorganization of resources
- Inability to track versions
- Inefficient sharing of information
- Difficulty keeping track of progress and ensuring all committee members have the most current information

In the practitioners' experience, emailing a dissertation manuscript back and forth can result in the disorganization of resources and sometimes the inability to keep track of various versions. When reviewing manuscripts in multiple locations on multiple computers, multiple formats can easily become scatted. Consequently, the wrong versions can often be reviewed. Additionally, communication done via email or verbally can be forgotten, thus, issues do not get addressed. Finally, when chairing or serving as a committee member on multiple dissertations, these researchers have found that it can be difficult to track progress on each candidate and ensure that all committee members have the most current information. SP provides a centralized location where all manuscript versions and comments are stored. It helps to ensure that the most recent version, and thus most accurate version, is being reviewed by the faculty or worked upon by the candidate. Additionally, SP allows for all communication to be logged, thus ensuring that it is addressed. SP workflows assist in identifying the progress for each candidate in a systematic manner and assist in keeping all committee members informed. Overall, SP helps individuals – the candidate, the chair, and the committee – locate information quickly and easily while helping to ensure accuracy.

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