**Choosing an internet-based tool for teaching and learning**

What if you want to explore for yourself what’s out there and make informed decisions on what tool to use?

Firstly, it’s useful to have in mind a set of criteria like the [Sloan Consortium’s:](http://sloanconsortium.org/Web_2.0_Selection_Criteria_Save_Time_Choosing_an_Appropriate_Tool)

* Access
* Usability
* Privacy & Intellectual Property
* Workload & Time Management
* Fun Factor

[Visit the weblink](http://sloanconsortium.org/Web_2.0_Selection_Criteria_Save_Time_Choosing_an_Appropriate_Tool) above for details on this.

Here are the different stages of the process:

**What type of tool?**

If you have no idea what’s available then you’ll probably need to talk to someone in the know. This will give you a starting point. From here, it’s about finding what this tool does and how that can be applied to learning. So for a mindmap, it’s about creating mindmaps for brainstorming, visualisation, reflection. You’ll notice that it’s not one simple concept here and it rarely is. What’s important is that you know what you want to use it for, choose a tool which is suited to this task and can articulate this clearly to the learners. Confusion can occur with tools that could conceivable perform a large variety of functions. Any collaborative document tool like google docs could be used for a multitude of learning activities. As long as you are clear about how you want the learners to engage in a tool and why, you’ll be OK. Just make sure you are not shoe-horning an activity into a tool that isn’t well suited to it. This process is about finding the best fit. For example, I could conceivably use a group blog for an asynchronous discussion. However, for this learning activity, I might be better off using a message board, a discussion forum embedded within a VLE or social network.

**Scoping out tools?**

The next step is to choose the particular instance of the chosen tool. For this, you need to scope out the available tools. This is something I do a lot. It isn’t an exact science, and you have to be aware that there will always be good ones you’ll miss. In fact, the hard part is finding the time every few month to find new instances that spring up. Also, in the fickly web 2.0 world, tools come and go so you need to check for disappearances — you usually get warning on this.

I like to start with sites that already scope out tools for educational use — [Free Technology for Teachers](http://www.freetech4teachers.com/) and [Richard Byrne’s Favorite Tech Resources for Teachers.](https://sites.google.com/site/richardbyrnepdsite/home) Also, I save to my [www.diigo.com](http://www.diigo.com) useful looking sites as I stumble across them. If you tag properly you can search by tool type when the need arises. What I want to avoid is googling. Although it’s not to be ruled out, you want to start from an informed place rather than a random one.

**So what should you be looking for?**

Cost: The first thing I look for is cost. Commercial products are a no-no for me. I want to recommend free tools where I can. Sometimes minimal cost tools are OK, but anything more than a few pounds/dollars is ruled out. When it comes to internet-based tools for use in teaching and learning, starting off by paying lots of money isn’t necessary. You can often tell by the look and feel of a commercial website. They will have pricing or product as one of their main pages and will often be aimed at businesses. Most tools will have different levels based on cost. If the lowest level is a free version, then it’s worth investigating. This is especially true if there’s a free upgrade for education. Free tools aren’t necessarily amateur looking, but there will be more variety in their layout. The Web 2.0 ethos is all important here. It is because of this ethos that we can try things out for free and then move on at no cost (apart from the odd email) if it’s not right for us.

Trying it out: The next thing is to try it out. Good tools will allow you to try it out quickly and easily. Ideally, there will be a video explaining and showing the features on the front page. Watch this first. This way you can decide quickly whether to dismiss it or not. It’s vital that you record the process you go through when you first start testing something. Answer for yourself questions like:

* How intuitive is it?
* How many stages are there?
* How easy are key functions?
* Does it do what I want it to?
* Is the language and terminology they use right for my context?
* How much learning would it take for learners to work it out?
* How does it look, and is this what I had in mind?

The hard part of this is judging whether your learners will have the same experience as you did when trying the tool. My advice would be: Don’t assume anything. A simple process that you were able to move through easily can derail an entire course if taken for granted. I know, I’ve seen it. I’m blessed with an inability to pick things up quickly. This gives me little scope for assuming too much. Providing a three minute [screencast](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Screencast) can go a long way. The quick learner can simply skip this.

Usually by playing around for a few minutes you get a feel for whether this could work for you. If you are scoping a few services, make a note of them (better still bookmark them) and move on. It’s common to not find anything you really want so you use the best you can find.

It’s worth mentioning the importance of account creation. You should always bear in mind that you want to keep additional logins for your students to a minimum. In this regard, tools embedded within the VLE will always win. However, you’ll be looking outside the VLE for tools that have no internal equivalent. Some tools can be used without creating an account, but most will require it. I’m talking here about communication/collaboration tools that require students to become actively engaged. If the tools are educationally inclined, they may allow the educator to create accounts for a group of students (e.g., Diigo).

For content creation tools like [www.prezi.com](http://www.prezi.com) are useful. For this you only you have to create an account and simply share/embed the results. You can usually get away with asking students to create one or two accounts on particular tools if the reasons and the benefits are clear. Anything more than that isn’t advisable. In general, account creation is getting easier with possible links to existing accounts you might have (like google). Be careful about linking with social networking accounts like facebook. I advise against it. It blurs the boundaries between the professional and the social. When it comes to using a social network service as the hub of activity, I prefer to go down the Ning or Grouply route rather than Facebook.

A process that needs investigating is the interaction between two instances of the same tool if this is what you want to realise in practice. Most of the time you can test this out yourself on the same machine, but you might need to use different machines or even involve another person. I am often employing different email accounts so that I can create different accounts on the same tool. I have one or two emails that only really get used for this purpose.

If you get to the stage where you think you’ve found something to use, you’ll need to try it out for real, hopefully with a friendly test audience. How it interacts with your VLE needs careful thought. A lot depends on how much you use your institution’s online environment currently and what its capabilities are. It might be as simple as providing a weblink with words around it. If you’re lucky, you can embed it somewhat. What’s important here is to think through what process/navigational support you need to provide. For a tool type that is new, you’ll need to clearly describe how you expect the learner will engage with the tool, with the other learners and to what end. So it’s more than explaining where to click. It’s about purpose and learning outcomes.

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