

Curating Content—Tools for Managing Digital Resources

“Information is a source of learning. But unless it is organized, processed, and available to the right people in a format for decision making, it is a burden, not a benefit.” William Pollard (1911-89)

He may not have experienced the Digital Age first hand, but physicist William G. Pollard hit the nail on the head when he observed that information without context or form is more burden than blessing. Information literacy has emerged as a critical skill set for students. Definitions for this type of literacy often address four facets: identifying, locating, evaluating, and using information. But there’s a fifth aspect of this skill set—the ability to organize the information that’s been found so that it can be effectively evaluated and used.

There’s no lack of readily available information. Researchers estimate that on average most people are exposed to the amount of information it would take to fill 174 newspapers (85 pages each) every single day! The challenge is in figuring out ways to channel this flood of material so that it can be evaluated and used. Adults often find this task daunting, so it’s no wonder that students are at a loss as to how to manage and use the information they find.

Fortunately, the need to manage content is being addressed at different levels using various technologies. We’ll explore three categories of online tools that educators and students can use to organize and manage information along with at least two examples of each. The tools mentioned here are either completely free, or offer free account options. But before looking at them, let’s begin with a brief discussion of the concept of curating content.

What is content curation?

Content curation is defined as “...the gathering, organizing and online presentation of content related to a particular theme or topic” (WhatIs.com, <http://goo.gl/GfpHh>). In the business world, content curation is part of an overall marketing strategy to insure that consumers are constantly on the receiving end of fresh information contributed by company employees and customers, and then distributed via numerous online tools. There is some controversy surrounding this practice. Supporters say that content curation provides a service and helps companies establish themselves as experts in their respective fields. Critics protest that the developers of the online tools are taking advantage of their own customers who actually populate sites with information. They also express objections to ubiquitous access to—and use of—curated collections of information on the basis that readers will abandon conducting their own research in favor of using materials gathered by someone else.

It’s safe to say, however, that content curation sites are being employed to serve a very different purpose in classrooms. Students aren’t typically using curating tools to build an audience outside of school. Instead, they frequently use these sites for personal benefit, to organize information for their own use or for collaboration with fellow students. If someone else happens to stumble across the curated collection, that’s fine, but the primary focus is to manage the content they find so they can more easily evaluate, use, and share material as it relates to classwork. Teachers may hope that the content they curate has a broader audience, but these collections often target fellow educators and are separate from the work they do with students.

Where does curated content fit instructionally?

Since Internet access for students became a reality, teachers have struggled with how to construct online activities so that students have choice in the online resources they use without wasting the entire class trying to find a few good websites they can use. Curated collections fit this bill nicely. This is not to say that effective Internet searching skills aren't important—they are. However, there are times when it's more practical for students to pick and choose from a vetted list of online resources.

The magnitude of these collections can range from just a few items with a narrow topic focus to 100 or more resources organized around sub-topics of a major theme. Some collections may be developed in a short period of time and then updated just to keep links current while other collections may be ongoing projects that are regularly updated and expanded. It all depends on the purpose of the collection. Once a collection is ready for sharing, it can be linked to (or embedded on) a webpage, blog, or wiki.

Content curation isn't limited to teacher/student interactions. Teachers regularly curate content for themselves, colleagues, parents, and other audiences. School administrators often curate collections to model effective use of technology, and students frequently curate their own collections of resources for study purposes. Many online tools support multiple authors, so collections can be developed by individuals or groups.

Tools for curating content

Content curation tools come in a variety of formats. Here are descriptions of three popular types of tools.

News Portals

Some content curation tools aggregate articles and social media posts to create online magazines or newspapers that anyone can subscribe to and follow. Many

educators use news portals, primarily to share information with colleagues. Here are examples of two popular sites.

- *Scoop.it!* (<http://www.scoop.it/>): This publishing-by-curation platform allows you to create an online magazine of resources related to a specific topic you identify. Scoop.it! offers a free basic account, but educators can also sign up for a Pro account for \$6.99/month. The Pro account offers a couple of features educators might like that are not available in basic accounts. Begin by using the free service, then upgrade to a Pro account if necessary. How does Scoop.it! work?

Start by selecting a topic you know well. There are several ways to add content to your topic. For example, the Scoop.it! website includes a suggestion engine that offers a list of content you can add with a single click. Or, you can install a bookmarklet on your web browser's tool bar and add content as you browse the web. Visit the Frequently Asked Questions section of the Scoop.it! website to learn more.

Once you have a topic and are adding content, share your Scoop.it! magazine through social media venues like Twitter, Facebook, or Google+. Your social media followers can subscribe to your Scoop.it! to follow your posts there. This can be an easy way to direct colleagues to specific online resources.

- *paper.li* (<http://paper.li/>): Scoop.it! online magazines are focused on one topic, but paper.li online newspapers consist of information that is related to a variety of topics and drawn from pre-determined resources. There are two account options—basic is free and Pro runs \$9/month. As with Scoop.it! start with the free account and upgrade to Pro later, if needed. This service requires you to have a Twitter or Facebook

account to sign up for an account. This means paper.li newspapers may not be curated by students age 12 and younger.

It's easy to get started with a paper.li of your own. Once you've signed up for an account, give your paper.li a title. You may also add an optional subtitle. Decide if your paper.li will be published twice daily, once daily, or weekly. Next, choose your story sources—paper.li draws from social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Google+, etc. You can accept default story sources or select your own. Finally, publish and promote your paper.li newspaper.

Lists

Curated lists of online resources are very useful when you want to share a limited number of links. I find that lists work best with 5 – 15 links. Fewer than five links are easier to add to a Web page than to incorporate into a curated list and more than 15 links probably need to be stored in a digital notebook (described in next section). Here are three popular tools for creating lists.

- *Pinterest* (<http://pinterest.com/>): Pinterest is a free social network that is used to create and share lists or *boards* of links. An image or video from a site is required to *pin* a link to a board, which means that a text laden site might not work. Most recent pins appear at the top of a board and cannot be rearranged. Users can follow one another and share individual pins.
- *Learnist* (<http://learni.st/category/featured>): Similar to Pinterest, Learnist is a free social network targeting anyone who wants to learn something. The idea is that Learn Boards will consist of links that will help readers learn about an identified topic,

sometimes in a specific sequence. It's easy to edit and rearrange links added to your Learn Boards at any time. Follow other users to stay up-to-date on their boards.

- *BagTheWeb* (<http://www.bagtheweb.com/>): Unlike Pinterest, BagTheWeb does not require an image to add a link to a list or *bag* as it's referred to on this site. In addition, it's possible to rearrange links within a bag. Choose a topic and start adding links to your bag. Once it's published a bag can be seen online by anyone who has the URL and other BagTheWeb users can view and link to your bag. Accounts are free and easy to set up.

Digital Notebooks

Digital notebooks are the tool to use when you want to create a share a complex collection of digital resources that are related to one broad topic but then sorted into smaller groups based on subtopics. Occasionally, the resources included in a digital notebook might be static—for example, a notebook of links provided in a public report probably will not require updating unless an amended version of the report is published. Most digital notebooks are living documents, requiring regular maintenance to stay current. Here are descriptions of three popular free tools.

- *LiveBinders* (<http://livebinders.com/>): The metaphor for LiveBinders is the digital three-ring notebook. A LiveBinder begins with a broad topic for the entire binder which includes tabs (dividers) that represent subcategories of the overarching topic. Each tab holds subtabs (pages) that link to digital resources ranging from website links to images, video, document files, etc. LiveBinder authors are completely free to identify and organize topics however they like, within the digital notebook

framework. A basic account is free. Education pricing is available for starter and professional accounts.

- *Evernote* (<http://evernote.com>): Many educators use Evernote to store notes, images, or web clippings without giving much thought to organizing these items. The fact is that all your items will be saved into a generic notebook unless you create and use individual notebooks to arrange them into topic-specific collections. Use of notebooks makes it much easier to find things you've stored in Evernote. Free accounts allow users to share notebooks with others and a premium account allows others to modify your notebooks. You can also add tags to facilitate keyword searches of notes. There are Evernote apps for iOS, Android, and Windows 8.
- *Springpad* (<https://springpad.com/>): Similar to Evernote, Springpad makes note organization a bit more obvious to users from the outset. It's easy to view all your individual notes (called Springs), but it's equally apparent that notes can be placed into notebooks which can be public or private. Springpad also offers more unique templates for note formats than does Evernote, including specific layouts for events, tasks, to-do lists, and more. Like Evernote, users can add tags so notes can be searched using keywords. Springpad accounts can be accessed with a web browser or by using an app (iOS and Android devices). There is a Springpad extension for Chrome and an add-on for Firefox. Students must be aged 13 and older to set up an account on this site.

Using web-based tools to curate all kinds of digital content will save time for you and your students. In addition, students will increase skills in information literacy.

Would you like even more leads? Check out this list at 55 Content Curation Tools to Discover & Share Digital Content (<http://goo.gl/xslmT>). Some of the sites on this list are clearly intended for student use while others may have age restrictions. Be sure to check the terms of service for individual sites before asking students to set up their own accounts. To help you get started, all the resources mentioned in this column are listed in a webliography available on my wiki site at <http://goo.gl/vYBWB0>.

Bio: A former Catholic school teacher, Susan Brooks-Young spent 23 years as a teacher and administrator. She now works as a professional consultant and author. Her latest book is **Making Technology Work for You: A Guide for School Administrators, 3rd Edition** (ISTE, 2013). Susan invites your comments at SJBrooks@aol.com.