USING GOOGLE+ FOR INSTRUCTION

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Introduced in July, 2011 in a beta test of invited users only, the new social media service Google+ (or G+) quickly spread by word of mouth, and Google leader Larry Page (2011) blogged that within sixteen days it had 10 million users. By August, it had 25 million users (Cashmore, 2011). Even with slower growth ahead (still with no marketing budget), the service looks likely to crest 100 million users perhaps as early as ten months, a feat that took Facebook three years. Other social networks, most notably Facebook and Twitter, have been used increasingly as instructional tools, since they are platforms with which students are already familiar (Maloney, 2007; McLoughlin & Lee, 2007). Selwyn (2009) found that students often eschew official channels for communication in favor of less formal community-based formats such as Facebook, implying a growing need for instructional communication tools that will be used willingly by students. The question is whether Google+ can be used like Twitter or Facebook to augment instruction, or even, perhaps, to improve upon those predecessors for academic purposes.

Google+ is like Twitter in that anyone can follow a given user's posts. There is no direct "friend" relationship required to read the posts written by others. However, it also approximates some features of Facebook. Rather than friends sorted into "lists" like in Facebook, Google+ allows users to place feeds into one or more "circles," the better to monitor (or control) the flow of information to and from different audiences. Circles are more intuitive, and more central to the experience, than the Facebook lists. They provide an explicit organizational structure, compared to the less-obvious listing functionality, which feels like an afterthought, found in Facebook.

Other tools available in Google+ include Hangouts, a group video-conferencing feature. What distinguishes Hangouts from other products is the ease of use. On the Google+ homepage is a link to start a Hangout, to which friends can be invited or may simply join. Advanced tools include voice activation and instant mute, with a walkie-talkie type function. Huddles, another feature, is group texting, which will feel familiar to users of traditional SMS texting, but Huddles do not incur direct data plan charges, so for smartphones they represent an alternative to SMS. Sparks are subscriptions that mine user data to suggest relevant and interesting content around the Internet. The common +1 feature mimics the "Like" button of Facebook, and provides similar data mining capability.

Games were only added to Google+ in August, and exist in a tab on their own to not crowd the feed of regular posts. While there is no polling ability, readers could use the +1 button on pre-typed comments to leave anonymous votes.

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Uses for Google+ inside a face to face classroom track closely the uses of other social media platforms. Just as one might use Twitter (or Facebook, especially direct messages) to make announcements, one could use Google+ to notify a particular Circle about class-related news. Or the service could be used by students to provide a platform for backchannel conversations during lectures. Students could develop their own Circles to facilitate class and group work, which is made especially easy when other elements of the Google suite of products are used, such as Google Docs or Google Sites. Just like Twitter and Facebook, Google+ also encourages students to follow each other's posts socially, establishing a feeling of community that Sitzmann (2006) finds effective in facilitating learning. All online courses face particular challenges in building community among students. Online courses will benefit from the inherent advantages of Google+ for creating links and embedding photos and videos. Compared to traditional learning-management systems like BlackBoard, Google+ allows for intuitive, copy-and-paste creation of links and media. The video Hangout feature offers the chance to hold virtual office hours via webcam.

As noted by Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty (2010), most students do not use Facebook for educational purposes. Among the reasons is the "creepy treehouse" effect. As defined by Jared Stein (2008), a creepy tree house is "A place, physical or virtual (e.g. online), built by adults with the intention of luring in kids." College-aged users of Facebook prefer to see that environment as their (decidedly non-academic) space. By virtue of avoiding the implications of a "friend" relationship, Google+ may feel more appropriate to students.

There may be reason to hesitate in adopting Google+ over Facebook. Market penetration remains higher on Facebook, and some users may resist the switch to Google+ out of a desire to avoid "starting over" when building relationships and networks. Additionally, Google's previous social networking attempts (Buzz, Wave) did not meet as much early success, and Google Wave has already been discontinued.

Despite the risks, however, Google+ appears to warrant further investigation as an instructional tool. Google+ will be integrated into an eventual Google-branded content-management system, so adoption rates should continue to rise. Its integration with other Google tools assures a consistency and ease of use that is hard to resist. Best of all, Google+ offers an alternative to Facebook in precisely the domain that matters most--the divide between public and private lives. Google+ lends itself to professional and instructional use, ceding ground to Facebook for more personal interactions.

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Dr. Kevin YEE has published extensively in the field of faculty development and his disciplinary research field of German Literature. His present position is Assistant Director of the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Central Florida. His undergraduate and graduate degrees are in German Literature, and he has worked in faculty development since 2004.

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