

eTools: Using Social Bookmarks in the Classroom

Corinne Weisgerber, St. Edward's University

Introduction

One of the challenges of being an educator is the struggle to keep your class materials fresh and relevant from semester to semester. For networked faculty who are plugged into an incessant information stream, there is generally no shortage of material from which to draw, but the overabundance of online content makes it difficult to keep track of useful online resources encountered either intentionally or serendipitously in the online spaces we inhabit. This is where social bookmarking tools come in handy as they can help instructors not only create a virtual warehouse of potential course materials, but also keep it organized and stocked with fresh resources without having to expend much time or energy.

What are Social Bookmarks?

Social bookmarks allow users to not only save links to online resources, but also to categorize and describe the content they are saving with user-defined keywords (referred to as tags) and to share that tagged content with others on the Internet. Unlike regular bookmarks, which are stored on a computer's browser, these bookmarks are saved in a publicly available online database. What makes these services "social" is the fact that "because social bookmarking services indicate who created each bookmark and provide access to that person's other bookmarked resources, users can easily make

social connections with other individuals interested in just about any topic. Users can also see how many people have used a tag and search for all resources that have been assigned that tag” (EduCause, 2005, p. 1).

How can I get Social Bookmarks for use in the classroom?

There are many free social bookmarking services from which to choose. Some of the most popular bookmarks include Diigo (www.diigo.com), Delicious (www.delicious.com), and Pinterest (www.pinterest.com). To get started, go to one of these websites and create a free account. Once you have created an account, you can start bookmarking online content. The easiest way to do so is to download a “bookmarklet” from these sites and install it on your web browser. A Diigo, Delicious, or Pinterest bookmarklet is a tool that allows you to either bookmark resources to your database (i.e., Diigo and Delicious) or pin them to one or more pin boards (i.e., Pinterest) with one click.

How can I use Social Bookmarks in the classroom?

Instructors and students alike can use social bookmarks to support learning in virtually any communication classroom. More specifically, social bookmarks can be used to:

1. *create a repository of potential classroom resources for use in your current and future classes.* By filing each online resource under a course specific tag using either a course number or the name of the course, instructors can create a repository of class

materials and easily add to it any time they stumble upon a new valuable piece of online content. This way, instructors can collect and store resources for courses they may not be scheduled to teach for a while. When the time comes to teach the course and prepare the syllabus, instructors simply retrieve the course-specific tag and sift through the potential course material accumulated under the tag. Because social bookmarks allow users to file content under more than one user-generated tag, online resources can be stored under numerous courses and can be easily found and retrieved at a later date.

2. forge a connection between you and other educators by scanning their bookmarks and subscribing to them. This often underused feature of social bookmarks turns fellow educators into virtual teaching assistants who collect relevant course materials for you. Because social bookmark users have the option of following a specific tag (e.g., www.diigo.com/tag/NameofTag), a specific user (www.diigo.com/user/UserName), or a particular tag used by a particular user ([www.diigo.com/user/UserName /NameofTag](http://www.diigo.com/user/UserName/NameofTag)), it is easy to grow your repository of online resources by piggybacking off the bookmarking done by other users. An additional advantage is that any resources obtained this way already will have been vetted by a fellow user who not only deemed them valuable enough to store, but also relevant enough to describe them with the same tag in which you are interested. As Warlick (2009) stated, "you are connecting yourself to resources that are supported by a

recommendation system" (p. 15).

3. *use social bookmarks to enhance your students' media literacy and independent learning skills.* Similarly to the aforementioned use, students can be taught to use social bookmarks to connect themselves to valuable information. To do so, you should set one or two class periods aside to teach students how to set up their own network of virtual teaching assistants who use social bookmarks and demonstrate how they themselves can use these bookmarks to locate information that informs their own learning experience.

4. *automatically stream relevant resources to students without having to send additional emails, update a course management system, or add content to a course website.* By having students subscribe to a particular course tag, you can quickly and effortlessly distribute news stories, blog posts, videos, or slideshows that pertain to the material discussed in class.

5. *continue the conversation outside the classroom.* As a result of the ability to stream course-related information to students at all times, you can carry the conversations started in class beyond the physical classroom and keep students engaged and thinking about course concepts outside scheduled class hours.

6. *have students contribute examples illustrating course concepts.* Students can be asked to bookmark at least one resource a week on a topic discussed in class (i.e., relevant news stories, articles, videos, podcasts, or slideshows) using the course-specific

tag instructors previously created. This practice gives students a voice and encourages shared responsibility for learning. For a more formal assessment, students can be instructed to summarize and explain the resource's relevance by adding a note to the bookmark, which is a feature supported by Diigo, Delicious, and Pinterest. Otherwise, this practice can be used to encourage in-class participation.

Conclusion

Social bookmarks are a powerful but often underused eTool capable of enhancing the learning experience in virtually any communication course. Their social nature allows instructors and students to not only store and organize information found online, but also to discover and peruse the bookmarks of other users and even to subscribe to them, thereby connecting themselves to a highly specialized information stream.

References

- EduCause Learning Initiative. (2005, May). *7 things you should know about . . . social bookmarking*. Retrieved from <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7001.pdf>
- Warlick, D. (2009). Grow your personal learning network: New technologies can keep you connected and help you manage information overload. *Learning & Leading with Technology*, 36(6), 12-16.