eTools: Using Easel.ly in the Classroom

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Introduction

In an environment rich with graphic content, access to a tool that can make the production of an infographic possible leads to a powerful and professional design. Using online tools to make the design experience easy and painless can benefit students and faculty alike. When working with graphic content, it is possible to enhance further the process with a tool that makes collaboration and sharing stress free. Such a tool is Easel.ly.

What is Easel.ly?

Easel.ly is an online tool used to create infographics through the use of templates or customized designs. There are two options--free and pro--for establishing an account. The free option allows users to drag and drop visual elements, make minor modifications on pre-formatted templates, and work with other individuals to create unique infographics. With this free account, the design options are somewhat restricted, but it still is possible to create high quality infographics. The pro option allows users to upload their own graphics (e.g., logos) and create projects from scratch. The pro account provides users with significantly more options for backgrounds, objects, and shapes. (Consult https://www.easel.ly/blog/infographicsforeducation to guide your use of infographics in the classroom.)

How can I get Easel.ly for use in the Classroom?

Users can create an account by going to www.easel.ly.com and choosing "sign up free" to get started. The free account provides limited access to templates and has several options for customization with 60 free images and 10 free fonts, whereas the pro account is available for $3.00 a month, which is charged as a one-time $36.00 annual purchase. The pro account has 680,000 free images, more than 50 fonts available if you do not want to upload your own, greater access to templates, the option to add your own graphics files, and optional design assistance. Moreover, all work in the pro account remains private unless you manually change the setting to public. Educational rates are available; however, the rate is determined by the number of students and instructors using it. (You can contact Easel.ly using the "Contact Us" button for information specifically suited to your educational institution).

How can I use Easel.ly in the Classroom?

Easel.ly can be used for both online and face-to-face courses. Specifically, Easel.ly can be used to:

1. *create a visual.* Whether students are asked to present or write, a visual representation of information can be an assignment for a variety of communication courses. Students can connect the graphic elements to represent content in unique and creative ways. It can also be a great way to enhance a presentation or create a handout.

2. *present infographics.* Infographics can be used as an alternative to a traditional

slide show to convey information to an audience during a speech or lecture. For each main point, a single infographic or a set of infographics may be used to enhance particularly important or complex information during a presentation. Depending on the nature of the presentation, the visual can be combined with another tool (e.g., Prezi; www.prezi.com) to conceal and reveal information.

3. *collaborate.* One of the great features of Easel.ly is the "Groups" feature, which allows instructors to facilitatate collaborative projects. Instructors with a pro account can create groups of students who can work together on a project. After logging in and choosing "Groups," a group name can be created and individual usernames can be entered. Easel.ly then generates a password for the group and a unique group identification that allows these students to access a shared online workspace. This collaborative option also allows students the opportunity to use the expanded features of the pro account without requiring them to register for their own pro accounts.

4. *check for understanding.* Students can create infographics to demonstrate their understanding of a particular concept. One of the unique parts of the infographic design process is the analysis and understanding of the material displayed in the graphic created. The design process allows students to present information in a highly visual way with concise text. Processing information for an effective infographic can demonstrate understanding of a concept relating to design, data, or ideas.

5. *simplify complex information.* Instructors and students can use this infographic

design tool to share complex information, making it visually appealing and more understandable. From the instructor perspective, the infographic can be used to present material during lectures, which may enhance student engagement with course content. From the students' perspective, the infographic design process allows them to identify and represent important ideas that deepen their understanding through the process. Furthermore, students' infographics can be used for class discussion or in forums that enable them to gain an understanding of how information can be presented and interpreted differently, even when they are working with the same content in the design process.

6. *share information*. One goal when designing an infographic is to share information in a visually appealing manner. Easel.ly makes sharing the infographic simple. Whether embedding the visual in a slideshow, creating a poster, or distributing a handout, it is not difficult to export the infographic, share a link, invite someone to edit, or save as a PDF. Whatever the purpose of the infographic, it is possible to make the file available in various formats to suit an individual user's needs.

Conclusion

Although it can take some time to learn its design features, with minimal experimentation, Easel.ly is a powerful tool for creating infographics for a wide variety of instructional uses. The unexpected benefit of creating a visual with this tool is the deeper understanding that occurs when students analyze and synthesize course content

intended to present information in a meaningful manner.