eTools: Using Weebly in the Classroom

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Introduction

Many instructors look for ways to bridge classroom projects with real life applications. Assignments that can be included in a student's career portfolio help accomplish that. Utilizing a free website creation tool such as Weebly allows instructors to create such opportunities both in online and face-to-face classrooms, and gives students a place where they can collect their work and carry it forward from class to class, culminating in a strong employment portfolio.

What is Weebly?

Weebly is a multifunctional online platform that allows users to create a professional website for a variety of personal or business uses. With an easy drag and drop website builder, access to a variety of templates and themes, and use of integrated marketing tools, Weebly provides even a novice user with a quick way to build a high quality website. Furthermore, the site can be accessed and modified on any device (e.g., desktops, laptop, tablets, or smartphones), allowing users opportunities for access at any time for building, managing, or editing needs.

How can I get Weebly for use in the classroom?

To access and use Weebly, students will need to go to www.weebly.com and register using their Facebook, Google account, or institutional account. Before

registering, I discuss with students the benefits and drawbacks of connecting their private social media accounts with a website that might potentially be used for a professional portfolio, as merging personal and professional identities may carry career consequences. It might be beneficial, then, to suggest that students register using their institutional e-mail address to keep their private lives out of their career sphere.

Basic use of Weebly is free (this free version displays Weebly ads, offers 500MB of storage, and comes with a weebly.com subdomain), whereas the Starter option costs $8 per month, removes Weebly Ads, and comes with unlimited storage, a free domain, $100 worth of Google ads credits. This option also offers advanced site statistics to help track daily website visits. Other, more costly options are also available to groups and organizations (i.e., Pro), as well as small businesses and stores (i.e., Business). For classroom purposes, the Free option works nicely, but students who wish to use videos and other high resolution media may want to select the Starter option. Moreover, as students enrich their portfolios, they have the options of purchasing additional tools or purchasing their own website space and maintaining it using Weebly's building tools.

How can I use Weebly in the classroom?

Weebly can be used in any classroom (tradition, online, hybrid, or flipped). One useful thing about Weebly is that it gives students and instructors an immediate look at the "end" version of the product, as well as allows the site owner to make instantaneously applied changes based on instructor recommendations during the

course and beyond the completion of the assignment. More specifically, Weebly can be used to:

1. *develop a professional portfolio*. Students in any communication course can start developing an academic or teaching portfolio, which allows them to market themselves to a potential employer. They could be instructed to create a variety of pages (e.g., Introduction, Qualifications, Research, Teaching) that contains elements of a traditional employment portfolio in the career of their choice. Each page can then be built with subpages to include individual materials, such as a résumé or curriculum vitae and current transcripts for the Qualifications area or a theoretical statement, examples of research, and academic publications for the Research area. Completion of pages could be graded throughout the course, allowing students to receive feedback on these elements as they are being added. Furthermore, learners can make changes as the semester progresses, strengthening their portfolio. By the end of the semester, an entire website could be graded as a holistic portfolio project, providing students with a fully or partially completed webpage they can continue updating beyond current class.

2. *develop an eCommerce product*. Students in marketing or advertising courses could be assigned to create an online website with an eCommerce potential for a fictional or a real business that could use online store presence. For example, they could be asked to investigate current online presence for a local business or to create an online store for an organization to market their products to a larger audience. Local craft

shows are a great opportunity to seek ideas for a business to work with as well. Otherwise, students might know someone who currently sells products and might benefit from online presence.

3. *market a nonprofit organization's fundraiser*. Many nonprofit organizations hold fundraisers to solicit funds for a variety of causes. Students could benefit from civic engagement by learning the value of community service and acquiring additional experience they could laud on their résumés. A class assignment could be used to connect students with their local communities and encourage community service. Local 5K walk/runs, Girl Scouts and Boy Scout troop fundraisers, and even student-run clubs and organizations that raise money for various causes could be considered. Students may use Weebly to create a promotion website to solicit donations and raise awareness for a local cause. The website then could be used by students as an example of community service when applying for jobs.

4. *create a photo portfolio for an artist*. Creative arts students could use this tool to compile portfolios of their performance and arts projects. Because of the versatility and potential of this tool, students may use it as a supplemental portfolio to their exhibits, or as a marketing tool to promote their exhibitions and to connect with potential visitors.

5. *develop advertising/promotional pages*. Students in advertising courses may practice their skills by selecting an entity such as a travel agency or a restaurant and

developing a promotional website. Similarly, to support students' involvement in their chosen career field, they may be asked to create a website for a professional development conference or an organization that supports continuing education in their chosen field.

6. *create a personal website*. Students who are interested in being self-employed and are pursuing careers that require self-promotion could be offered the opportunity to develop a personal website to help market their skills. Some examples of such careers might include a motivational coach, an inspirational speaker, an occupational or physical therapist, or an organizational consultant.

Conclusion

Using Weebly as a pedagogical tool can help develop materials that students will use well beyond their current semester, and aid them in creating a solid online presence. This easy to learn and use tool introduces students to the importance of online presence, and provides instructors with opportunities for an important conversation regarding its significance to student's future employment success. Although the aforementioned ideas are only a few examples of how Weebly can be used in the classroom, instructors within the communication field are encouraged to think of other innovative ways for this tool to meet learning goals and create practical real-life connections and experiences.