

# How Do Distance Students Use Technology to Bridge the Geographical Gap?

Fallon Bleich,  
MLIS Candidate, Rutgers State University  
Mary-Michelle Moore,  
MLIS Candidate, Rutgers State University

## Introduction:

The habits MLIS candidates learn while they are still in the classroom will carry over into their professional interactions. As students work towards their degree they will participate in multiple group assignments, work with others on poster submissions, literature reviews and other projects that will shape their expectations and skill sets for collaborative work as information professionals. The collaboration process takes on an added level of complexity when students are working on their projects from different geographic locations. As students in the Rutgers distance program, we have a unique opportunity when we interact with our peers, many of whom we have never met in person. Students are an ideal source for these sorts of questions because the deadlines imposed on them by the semester system force them to plan, revise and execute strategies in a timely manner. Short deadlines force students to make quick decisions on how and when to try new technology, when to stay the course with a new piece of software or when to move on with a different course of action.

We conducted a survey of library students and recent graduates who have taken at least one online class that required a group project. We asked the students about how they collaborated with their peers for group assignments, what software they used to interact and how they delivered the finished product. We hope results of this survey provides insight into how new generations of librarians are approaching collaborative endeavors and how they use technology to accomplish both new and traditional ends in innovative ways.

## Methodology

We distributed a 9 question survey through primarily through email and social media. We had 44 respondents over the course of two months.

### What kind of projects did students do? What tools did they use?

"One of my projects included 2 other students and we collaborated using Google Docs. We initially broke the task up between ourselves and then put the report back together and edited it together. Another project included 2 other students and we used a Wiki to work together. We also used Google chat several times to discuss the project."

"I had various group assignments, however the one that left the largest impression on me was one where we had to build a digital library with THREE people. It was incredibly intense, but we all realized the impact of the assignment and really pulled together to make it great. The final deliverable was a website created in Greenstone with 100 items of content with supporting metadata. We had nearly two months to complete it."

"In one case there were three of us--in another there were 4. In one case we created a Wiki; in another we created a website. One was on the topic of knowledge management; the other was on the topic of internet privacy issues. We had several weeks to complete the project. We also were charged with moderating an online discussion for one week on that topic."

## Discussion of Findings:

The average group size for the students we surveyed was 4 people (though one respondent reported as many as 7 people in a collaborative group). The most common deliverables were a research paper or a project website.

Most software discoveries for the group projects were introduced in a previous class or suggested by a classmate rather than something that was discovered by the survey taker. We expected online students to be more inquisitive and willing to try out new free software but most of our respondents did not report doing so. This could be due to the time constraints inherent in deadlines imposed by class projects. However, it could be an indicator of unwillingness to seek out new tools when existing tools are known to work well enough or there may be a reluctance to introduce new untried systems in a group setting.

Another common determiner of collaborative tools used was the professor of either the current class or in a previous class. If a student used a program in class once they are more likely to use it again in future projects. Most students said they would use any software again if it was free and they already knew how to use it instead of seeking out a different, perhaps better fitting option for a different project.

## Thoughts for Future Study

We decided to poll current MLIS candidates and recent graduates in part because we had access to student list-serves and we believe that the habits students develop while in graduate school will carry into their professional roles. Since online collaboration is continuing to grow as a work style it would be interesting to see if the respondents continued their conservative use of free technology when collaborating (they chose familiar software because of short deadlines) or if, once free of time constraints begin to experiment more with other options.

Our survey was taken over a short period of time and we had some difficulty discovering and accessing student list-serves for schools other than our own. A longer survey period (or perhaps one not in the summer) and a re-focused attempt to connect with list managers where we did not have a referral or personal connection may yield different results.

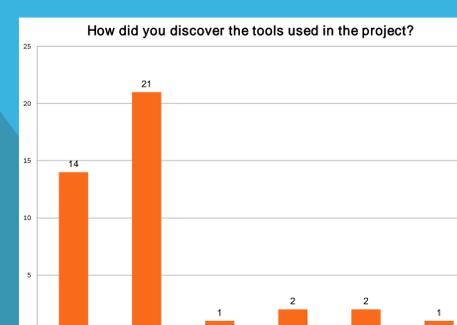
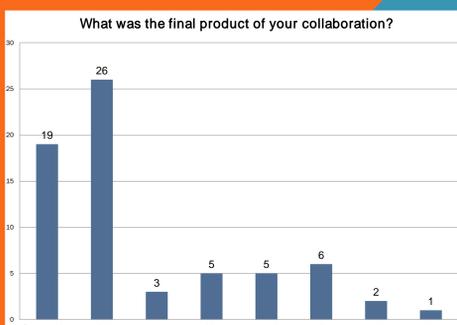
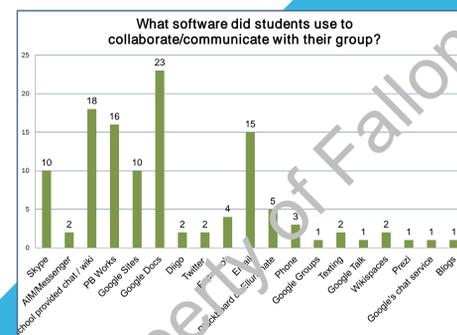
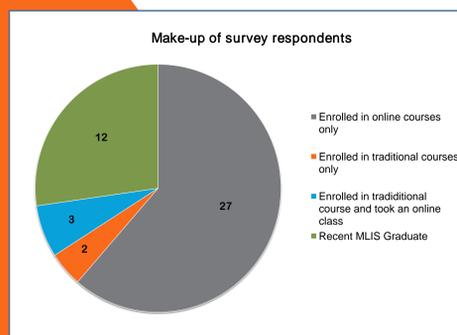
Our survey was multiple choice with the option to provide detailed answers. We don't know if having a list to choose from limited students answers or helped jog their memory of tools used, either way that may be a factor in drawing conclusions based on the results and may have to be re-examined in the future.

### Would the students use the tools again?

"Yes. Having programs such as Google Sites/ Docs, where we all can log in and work at the same time, is very helpful."

"Yes, all of the tools that we used (email, Skype, Google docs) were very useful. Text messaging was especially effective when we needed to contact each other in real-time. The engineers were particularly beholden to Google Hangouts (via Google+), but my fellow MLIS student and I did not like using it. We briefly tried using WebEx (which would have allowed us to view screencasts of the app), but the signup process turned out to be too complicated and it was only free for two weeks anyway."

"I found pbworks to be easy but aesthetically ugly, I think for a presentation of this kind in the future I would look for software that allows the creation of a better looking presentation. Diigo was a great way to share links and comment on them."



For more details please visit our website:

<https://sites.google.com/site/howstudentsbridgethegap/>