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At a Glance:

• Web-based method of accepting and filtering ideas
• Users vote to raise or lower a topic's importance
• Everyone's voice is heard, both physically and virtually

Who to Contact:

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The Scenario:

Andrew is giving a guest lecture for a sociology of gender course with 300 students. When he teaches his own course on human sexuality over the summer, he establishes the classroom as a safe space and gradually gets the students to open up and discuss topics honestly. However, since he is only visiting the biology course for a single session, he is concerned that students won't feel comfortable saying what is on their mind regarding a controversial topic.

To address this concern, Andrew decides to use Google Moderator. Several days before his lecture, he logs into Google Moderator and creates a new series called "Human Sexuality" and sets the series so anyone can submit questions anonymously. Within the series, he creates two topics. One is "I always wanted to ask the ladies..." and "I always wanted to ask the guys...". He sends the URL for the series to the instructor, who distributes it to her students along with a request for them to bring their laptops or Web-enabled phones to class.

The guest lecture starts off as planned. During the presentation, a few students post questions about hormones, birth control, and the menstrual cycle. Other students vote-up the questions that they have an interest in. Andrew pauses periodically to address the most voted-upon questions.

The lecture takes a completely unexpected turn when someone posts a video that they found on YouTube about "Pregnant Man", a transgender man who became pregnant and carried a

7 Things You Need to Know about Google Moderator

A white paper from Teaching and Learning with Technology at Penn State

1. What Is It?

Google Moderator is a Web-based tool that lets a user set up a series of one or more topics to which people can post questions. For example, a course instructor can set up a series for an entire course and then use different topics for each course module or class session. Students in the course can submit questions or ideas to each topic as part of their class participation grade. Other students in the course can vote for the questions they would like to see addressed. The instructor can post responses to each question or idea and vote for the ones that he or she finds to be the most interesting or relevant.

In a sense, Google Moderator is a way to accept and filter questions and ideas in a course. It is also a way to create a record of what students understand, question, and would like to explore further. The instructor can use this to see what direction the class would like to see the course take. Of course, faculty still will have the final say.

2. Who's Doing It?

Google Moderator was used by the President-Elect Barack Obama's transition team in a public series called "Open for Questions", in which they answered questions from the general public. Some faculty are trying a similar method of capturing questions, ideas, and discussion topics using Twitter and a special course-specific tag. For example, in a Disruptive Technologies course (CI 597), the faculty and students use Twitter to make comments about topics discussed in class and resources such as related articles, blog posts, and Web sites. People who are not taking the course often see these "tweets" and respond. Moderator could create the same kind of interaction, but with additional features such as voting, responses, and options for organizing the way the questions and issues are displayed.

3. How Does It Work?

To set up Moderator, start by logging into http://www.google.com/moderator. Click "Create Series," and give the series a title such as the course name, semester and year. There are options to allow or disallow anonymous comments and YouTube videos, as well as options in naming categories. People can submit questions, ideas, or suggestions to an event, meeting, or topic. Additional owners can be added to help respond to questions, review items that have been flagged as inappropriate, and change settings as needed.

After creating the series, create topics within the series such as the "I always wanted to ask the ladies/guys..." questions mentioned in the scenario for this whitepaper. When students submit their questions, they will submit them to one of these topics. Questions or ideas can contain descriptions of up to 250 characters with URLs. Students and the instructor can see the questions that have been posted and vote on the ones that they think are important. They can also flag questions that may be inappropriate such as "questions" from spammers, attempts to sell football tickets, or offensive videos.

Owners of a series can choose to respond to questions that have been submitted. Responses can't have videos, but they can be up to 10,000 characters long and can include URLs. Owners can also set how they want questions to be displayed: showing newest questions; showing questions with the most positive votes; or showing questions with the most recent activity.

Participants can also submit URLs as part of questions, which become active clickable links. Google Moderator can be embedded in a static Web page or a system like Blogs at Penn State with the use of an iframe. In ANGEL, instructors can change the tab settings in a course so one of the tabs goes directly to a Google Moderator series.

baby to full term. The video is voted to the top of the list quickly and students begin raising their hands to ask questions about the biological and sociological nature of gender. Those are excellent questions that address core objectives for this course.

Related Sites:

http://www.google.com/moderator

http://www.google.com/support/moderator/

Google Moderator Research Team

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4. Why Is It Significant?

Google Moderator is significant because it allows a presenter to solicit feedback, often in the form of questions, in venues which might previously have been feedback prohibitive due to logistical feasibility or social discomfort. Because audience-submitted participation is socially rated, it also insures the audience's most salient questions or comments are brought to the forefront, maximizing the effectiveness of any Q&A period.

Its social media and Web-based nature not only makes Moderator ideal for large audience presentations, but also for physically distributed or asynchronous ones. As it can be easily embedding into an existing Web site or blog, Google Moderator allows the user to easily archive Q&As, or share it with the world alongside your existing course, presentation, or personal Web presence. Ultimately, Google Moderator is a tool designed to empower participation in presentation style environments.

5. What Are the Downsides?

Internet access is an integral part of all of Google's products. However, because of the likelihood that it will be used in a synchronous, presentation, or classroom style environment, the use of Google Moderator is best paired with wireless Internet access. This is a potentially sizable requirement depending on the number of individuals supported.

If you are not the owner of a topic/event, you are unable to leave responses to questions regardless of whether you are logged in or not. Only the owner of a topic can respond to its questions. This is a sizable limitation, as it forces a top down approach to the question asking process. Community involvement is thus limited, because participants are not given the opportunity to share their thoughts, opinions, and experiences with whomever asked the question.

This top down response model also makes the tool far more synchronous. Questions can be asked at any time, but answers only come when an approved owner responds. Making every potential user an owner solves this problem--but depending on the scope of the event in question, this may not be feasible. It is also a less than ideal solution in a classroom setting, where giving every student ownership of the class moderation space could be problematic.

6. Where Is It Going?

Google Moderator provides unique insight into an audience's understanding by capturing the backchannel and allowing the audience to weight which questions, suggestions, or ideas are most interesting to them. Thoughts that used to be lost while waiting for an opportunity to raise them can now become part of the discussion without interrupting the flow of the speaker. Moderator makes live distance events very interactive, broadens the scope of the audience and the classroom, and acts as an archive of the important points of a discussion. Moderator is flexible enough to be used in lectures, team meetings, Q & A sessions, or even as a research tool to gather popularity-ranked feedback. YouTube has now integrated Google Moderator to aggregate viewer comments, and it is easy to anticipate more sites will add this type of social ranking of feedback.

7. What Are The Implications for Teaching and Learning?

While tools such as clickers can allow instructors to solicit feedback from their classes, they are limited in that they only allow participants to submit pre-defined answers to pre-defined questions. Google Moderator removes that limitation, allowing any student to ask any question they choose. With Moderator's social ratings feature, the most popular questions will rise to the top, making them more likely to receive the instructor's attention, which in turn leads to more satisfied, well informed students. As Moderator is web based, students can ask questions (and receive responses) at any time rather than just during class or office hours. It also provides a less socially stressful means of posing questions for students who might struggle with spoken English, or students in large lecture classrooms. Obviously a raised hand is a tried and true way to ask a question, but even that assumes a shared physical space with the instructor. With an increasing number of non-resident, non-synchronous course offerings, Moderator provides a way for students to engage their instructors in a shared space, even if it is a virtual one.