

Case Profile: Zoe Midler and Google Docs

Zoe Midler

Abstract

Google Apps for Education is not only helping elementary school librarian Zoe Midler connect with students and teachers to infuse information and research skills seamlessly into the curriculum but is also serving as her new medium for educating parents and including them as part of the larger library learning community. This chapter highlights Midler's experience in embedding herself in and outside of the fifth-grade classroom through Google Docs to build students' fluency in the use of research databases.

Collaboration doesn't look the same for all teachers.

—Rebecca (Becky) Reed, Principal, Warder Elementary, Jefferson County Schools, Colorado

I think about Becky's advice, quoted above, when considering my approach to teacher/librarian collaborations. This one piece of advice made me realize that as a twenty-first-century teacher-librarian, I can't just hope that contextually relevant opportunities will come along, that I will get a chance to share my research expertise and demonstrate how to use databases. I have to be proactive and find ways to inject and embed my expertise into the teachers' instructional routines in a way that both complements the teachers' learning objectives and also establishes my brand as information professional. Google Apps for Education has provided me with a medium to achieve this goal.

Challenges and Opportunities

My school, Flagstaff Academy, has been a Google Apps for Education school since 2009. Staff and students

have integrated Google Docs into their workflow, and assignments are routinely distributed via Google Docs (as shared documents or templates); consequently, faculty and students are aware of the collaborative power of Google Docs. However, I realized just this semester (Fall 2011) that collaboration in Google Docs didn't necessarily need to be limited to cowriting, editing, and comments; I began to see possibilities for interacting with students through instructions, directions, tips, and hints at the students' point of need.

How would this work? I needed a collaborative partner to flesh out this vision. Our fifth-grade team requires students to conduct a weekly "A to Z" homework assignment. Every week students answer a specific set of questions that include a topic that begins with a specific letter of the alphabet.

Many of the parent volunteers in the Library Media Center (LMC) are also mothers of fifth-grade students. I heard firsthand about their frustration helping their students conduct their A to Z research: their children didn't know where to go to find facts, and they didn't know if what they found was credible. I noticed that the students would type entire questions into Google and just use whatever sources came up in the first three results. Additionally, the students seemed unaware of Creative Commons (CC)-licensed multimedia or concepts related to copyright and intellectual property.

When I showed them our Safe Searching Resources (Facts on File, CultureGrams, e-books, *Grzimek's*, research guides [also known as research pathfinders]) and how easy it is to locate targeted facts using these tools, students were initially surprised to learn these resources existed and were available to them; they also liked the fact that source citations were included in these resources. Additionally, students enjoyed discovering how to find copyright-friendly

multimedia by using the CC Image Searching page on the LMCWiki.

LMCWiki

<http://flagstaffacademylmc.wikispaces.com>

Parents and students who came into the LMC to work on A to Z would benefit from my guidance and suggestions. However, this method was hit-or-miss at best. I had to think of a way to reach everyone, parents and students, at the point of need. That's when I decided to create LMCTips and hints and embed them directly in the A to Z assignment.

I asked the fifth-grade lead teacher, Kelly Burnett, to share the A to Z weekly assignments with me. The assignment was a Google Docs document that each fifth-grade teacher publishes as a webpage to her website. Burnett gave me edit rights to the Google document so whatever I added would automatically update to the webpage and assignment. I completely rebranded the A to Z assignment, adding a logo to the assignment page and specific directions on how students could use Safe Searching Resources to locate data and information that would help them find facts and formulate answers for that week's letter.

Kelly Burnett's A to Z Weekly Letter

<https://sites.google.com/a/flagstaffacademy.org/mrs-burnett-s-5th-grade/assignments/a---z-weekly-letter>

Contextual Relevance and Teacher Support

In addition to adding LMCTips and hints, the fifth-grade team also scheduled class visits in the LMC for letters B–D so I could introduce how LMCTips worked within the document and model Safe Searching resource features and benefits. These benefits included

- accessing the LMCWiki (Safe Searching portal— one-stop-shopping)
- reviewing passwords for databases
- modeling the difference between searching on Google and searching for information in a database
- recognizing and developing keywords as part of search literacy
- discussing MLA7 citation format and the importance of citing sources
- demonstrating how Google finds results (ranking versus filtering)
- locating citations in databases and demonstrating citation builders

The graphic is titled "A-Z Research" and features a logo with the letters "aZ" and several book covers. Below the title, it says "K". The main instruction is: "1. States: Kentucky or Kansas. Include 5 facts about the state that you have selected. Use your own words. Include the year that it became a state, a map and an example of the state flag." There is an "Optional Safe Search Challenge" section with a small "Safe Search" icon and text: "If you have achieved Ninja Star accuracy with Culture Grams than you know how to use the distance calculator to calculate the distance, in miles and kilometers, between the Frankfort, KY and Topeka, KS. If you haven't earned your Culture Grams Ninja Star accuracy badge try this challenge to earn your badge. Remember, you can add these badges to your personal web pages." At the bottom, it says: "(Information can be found on pages 293-294 of Core Knowledge History book) Write in your journal 5 facts. How does this group of people impact our history?"

Figure 3
Sample LMCTip A to Z graphic

The teachers were present for every session and were adamant that students use the LMCTips, hints, and Safe Searching Resources for A to Z (see figure 3). Because teachers wanted to immerse their students in the database resources, students were not allowed to use sources through Google Search. Burnett created an A to Z citation log in which students are required to cite all sources they used for that week's letter. I embedded sample citations, a link to the EasyBib MLA7 citation guide, and links to popular citation builders into the citation log. All citations must adhere to MLA7 format, and if a student uses an open Web source from the research pathfinder, he or she must build a citation or use a citation builder to create an accurate MLA7 citation.

The other benefit of the LMCTips has been the opportunity to model searching virtually for students. If they repeat the steps outlined in the LMCTips, it's as if I am sitting next to them showing them how to search more efficiently.

Who Says We Don't Need Badges?

To further motivate students to follow the LMCTips, I created a series of virtual badges that students can earn to demonstrate their Safe Searching (database) proficiency. I embed an image of the badge into the A to Z assignment page. These badges really got the students' attention! To earn a badge, students share their citation logs with the teacher, and it is up to the teacher whether or not a student has followed the LMCTips and earned the badge. Once a student or class earns a badge, the teacher posts the badge to her website, and students can also post it to their personal websites.

Results and Assessment

Initially, a few students would come to the library and say that they were using the tips and finding helpful, meaningful information. I would ask then to show me what they did and ask questions like these:

- Did you follow the tip directions?
- Did you read the result snippets?
- Did you click on the right result?

In each case, I discovered the student didn't quite follow the directions and had fallen into the old habit of searching for information with Google instead of rereading the directions and steps for the search exercise.

Working with the fifth-grade team, we took a routine weekly fact-finding assignment and cranked it up a notch by adding specific search skill tips and providing virtual badges as an incentive. According to Burnett, "The fifth grade team has greatly appreciated Zoe's work on improving the quality of research for our A to Z project. She provides the students with resources that help them learn in a fun and engaging manner." Another fifth-grade teacher added, "The students have LOVED the resources that are added to the A-Z assignments. They are able to find more meaningful and useful information by using these credible sites."

Parents have communicated to teachers that they are using LMCTips to help direct their students. In the process, parents are learning the value of our Safe Searching resources and encouraging their students to use those resources first before heading to Google. One parent told me, "I get it, you don't want us to start with Google." Another parent, who learned how to use the databases side-by-side with her child, commented, "What fantastic information. I never realized we had access to such a vast spectrum of resources!" Because this initial effort has been so successful, Burnett and I are already planning on conducting A to Z Safe Searching workshops for parents at the beginning of next year so we can introduce parents to our collection of databases and e-books before students begin their research efforts.

Here are some reflections about LMCTips from fifth graders:

- "I love LMCTips because instead of being worried out of my head trying to figure to find info the LMCTips keep me cool & right on track!!" —Laura
- "They [LMCTips] help you get your A-Z done quick & easy. They make sure you not Google things too much." —Alak
- "I like the LMCTips because instead of looking everywhere I can just go straight to the perfect spot." —Brinley
- "The LMCTips help a lot by telling you some keywords and hints." —Andrew



Figure 4
MLA citation log

Teachers and I are watching the citation logs (see figure 4) to see if students are correctly citing sources and whether the sources are database sources or librarian-vetted pathfinder sources. Teachers are also observing where students go to find information for other research efforts, for example, animal classification, explorers, and so on. Teachers and parents are saying that students are making the LMCWiki databases and pathfinders their first stop.

We are also watching our database usage logs and can see a direct correlation between database activity spikes and units of study that lend themselves to these sources. In the past, students researching states never visited CultureGrams, but now we can see a huge increase in visits and retrievals during this unit of study. The same is true for *Grzimek's* during the Animal Classification unit of study and for the Westward Expansion e-book reference collection during the Civil War and Westward Expansion unit of study. A to Z to was first and foremost about creating awareness of these resources and teaching students that there are alternatives to Google. We have achieved this goal.

Conclusions and Reflections

I am embedding tips directly into assignments and rubrics created in Google Docs (documents, spreadsheets, and presentations) that are shared with students or published as webpages on teachers' websites. I have also developed a suite of Google Docs templates for middle school students to use for their STEM Fair research process that include embedded instructions on how to create publication-quality formatted

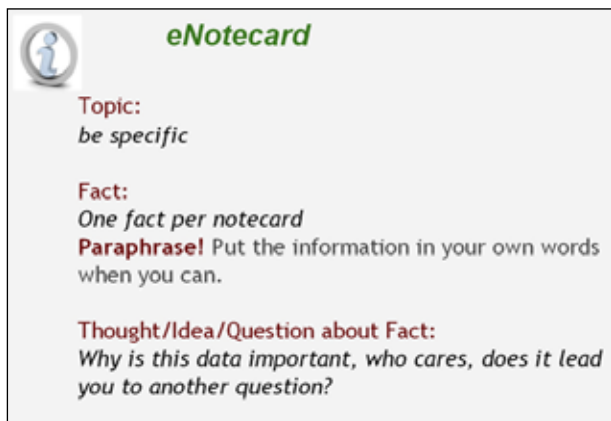


Figure 5
eNotecard template

documents and how to avoid cut-and-paste plagiarism. Students in grades five through eight are using an eNotecard template (see figure 5) I created as a Google Docs presentation that includes sample notecards that students can duplicate and a keyword searching slide where students can list keywords and concepts as they research. Students share their eNotecards with me, and I comment or offer tips on their notes, provide more keywords, and send them direct links to database articles and additional resources.

I am not waiting for teachers to schedule flex time to collaborate, but instead I am actively seeking out ways to embed my expertise and our collection of virtual resources into the fabric of an assignment or unit of study. Google Apps allows teacher-librarians to reach out to teachers, students, and parents

and provide instruction and help in a relevant and timely way.

Samples of A to Z LMCTips, Safe Searching Badges, and eNotecards

Letter D

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IhWpLFemaZTNbkeK5NbONsQCayN2wXBXDdzpJOfCdc/edit>

Letter E

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ARwAMnaPZe67x6hpNL2VDZ_FxBBYZzAfHBWEXh5YAtw/edit

Letter F

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1PzSXjA0S5dJvA9BHPSQScIkb_uyFOIJ7EWnYFBvMTMo/edit

Letter I

https://docs.google.com/document/d/16f0RDSStoDfYAXvt8SFipH4_egmjZzD49_DiwZSWmqA/edit

MLA Citation Log

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1OdqFYxEN4zhMAHJGunLXKemHF5F35B87AsUZaA04JDc/edit>

eNotecard

<https://docs.google.com/present/edit?id=0AXTMxa8a1N03ZHI2azV4aF82OTZjNDJrZzhmNw>