

Make the Dream Work: 11 Key Features for a Collaboration Platform

By Keith Yanke

When higher-education institutions invest in new methods to support students and faculty, they require tools that create competitive advantages and efficiencies without sacrificing students' ability to learn.

One such tool is collaboration technology, which Gartner identified in 2016 as one of the top 10 strategic technologies it recommends for the higher education sector: "The need to find people and ideas and communicate and collaborate on a global scale has always been fundamental to the higher education community. Collaboration technology is a sweeping definition of technology that facilitates research, education and outreach effectiveness for a team. It is certainly not a new trend or capability. However, it has increasing importance in a globalized online education ecosystem where many team members are geographically scattered."

Collaboration technologies support group work in classrooms, huddle spaces and media centers, as well as distance education, allowing students to work together more easily, in real time and from anywhere. Solutions have uses outside the classroom as well, allowing instructors and administrators to collaborate on lesson plans, curriculum, strategic planning and more.

However, challenges remain with the process of a team working together to edit documents, hash out ideas and brainstorm solutions to solve complex problems in real time. When team members can use their own devices to offer input, the process becomes easier. But supporting a mix of devices and platforms in one collaborative space is problematic – and what if some team members aren't in the same location?

Many new collaboration platforms mitigate these problems, however – but it's important to know exactly what to look for in a technology.

11 Important Features for a Collaboration Tool

Imagine a brainstorming session in which every team member could be engaged simultaneously – seamlessly sharing their thoughts, problems and improvements in the form of documents, videos, graphics and just about any other format of digital data imaginable. This is the new reality collaboration solutions allow – but there are a variety of options on the market, and what works for one university or college may not work for another.

While it's critical to find the right fit for the institution's specific culture, several key

characteristics of a collaboration solution will ensure it is best equipped to help students and teachers succeed:

Supports multiple devices: Many universities (and workplaces) have implemented a bring-your-own-device (BYOD) culture, making it essential to have a collaboration platform that lets students work off any device they want, no matter the ecosystem.

A solution centered around a single platform means only devices of that platform can interact, which limits how effective students and teachers can be. Sharing content like standard-format (PDF, PowerPoint, jpeg, etc.) files, documents and presentations and from any platform should be as easy as passing a piece of paper.

Supports distance learning: Collaborators should be able to work with each other in the same room – but they also should be able to work with colleagues across the globe. Many schools have study abroad or adjunct programs in other countries, and the ability to collaborate across thousands of miles allows group work even when not everyone is in the same time zone. A solution should allow real-time simultaneous collaboration, so group members don't have to email work back and forth, and each user can see what everyone else is seeing.

This will serve not just students, but also educators, who can participate in training and professional development sessions from anywhere.

Has video conferencing capabilities: A solution that supports both software-based video conferencing services like Skype as well as hardware-based systems like Cisco facilitates distance learning as well as standard video conferencing. Users can see and interact with each other as they are drawing, updating and sharing content.

Offers built-in apps as well as downloads: Many solutions offer apps built right into the platform software that allow users to take notes, draw, pull up websites, create PDFs, print and more. The types of apps important to an individual university will vary, but it can be helpful to have at least a few options so that apps don't need to be purchased separately. Many solutions allow apps to be downloaded to the platform software as well.

Has touch control: Instead of having to walk back and forth between the device and the collaboration hub, a device with touch control allows a student or teacher to use the platform

hub to control a computer or device, and vice versa. This means the platform won't need additional software installed to work with devices; users can drag and drop media files from computers to the platform for more seamless interaction.

Allows wireless device mirroring/screen sharing: This will allow users to connect wirelessly and stream content from their own devices to the shared screen live, in real time, and lets them use their own devices as presentation tools on the screen.

This is another option that creates convenience, as users don't need to transfer files or even get up from their seats to show their content on the screen. As each person makes notes, annotates text or sketches ideas, using his or her own device, the changes appear live on the shared display – and more than one device should be able to connect at a time.

Allows sessions to be recorded: Even the ability to collaborate across time zones doesn't mean every group member will be able to participate in every session; other obligations (sick days, outside appointments, etc.) might limit participation in some instances. A platform with the ability to record a session, save it to the cloud and email it to others for review provides flexibility for users who can't attend a certain session.

Has multiple storage options: Users should be able to load and unload content from thumb drives, other devices, the web or the cloud, from any type of operating system and for multiple types of content formats, to cut down on time moving files around to compatible devices.

Has an intuitive design: Users should be able to easily learn the platform and its capabilities without a lot of training – this feature can be determined by taking the platform on a "trial run" to see how it works. Even new users shouldn't need too much time to figure things out, to have an "instant on" experience when using the platform.

Offers an expandable work surface: While a university might select one single type of collaboration tool across the board, each classroom, conference room and meeting room may have a different type and size of screen in it, so it can be important to find a platform with an expandable work surface that allows users to zoom in and out, and change the canvas aspect. Expandable work surfaces mean users are not limited to a standard 16-by-9 ratio, no matter what size screen they're working off.

Allows content consolidation: Even though many users might be working off their own devices, it can be handy to have a way to bundle or consolidate all collaborations into a single work that can be viewed on the screen.

Not all of these options come standard in every type of collaboration platform – and not every school will need all of these options right now. However, it's important to find a platform that not only meets current needs, but also can scale up if necessary. With every solution, educators must ask: How does this solution work in this environment? How does it help us meet our goals? How might it help meet future goals?

New Education Possibilities

The ability to work well with others to make decisions and solve problems is an increasingly valued skill among employers. In addition, social learning theory suggests there are benefits to student collaboration: The work that students can produce together is much more sophisticated than what they can produce by themselves.

With collaboration tools, educators can move beyond traditional sit-and-listen lectures to active approaches to learning, driving engagement for students and providing them with real-world skills that they can use long after graduation.

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