RE: Electronic Tool Review: Google Wave

Well, have you received your Google Wave invitation? Initially, Google only allowed people with invitations to join Google Wave. However, it is now open and free for anyone to use who has a Google account. Interestingly, you can send invitations to 25 people but after those are used; I’m not sure what happens. Google unveiled Google Wave (http://wave.google.com) in May 2009. It is not easy to explain what it is or what it does but here is my explanation after testing it out and reading reviews.

Google Wave is a real-time communication and collaboration platform invented by Lars and Jens Rasmussen. In other words, it's like a supper email and wiki combined where two or more people can write or add material at the same time. You can also embed other applications into the messages.

The future of email. Some evaluators believe this is the newest generation of email. Google Wave goes beyond email in that several people can be working on one conversation or document at the same time. Everyone can see what is being written as it is being typed. There are two disadvantages to the real time feature of Google Wave. First, like the spoken word, once words are typed, other people can read them. You can backspace and erase the words but they have already been seen. If you do a lot of editing, you may not like everything being seen before you proof it. Second, Google Wave demands immediate attention like a phone call. And whenever anyone modifies a wave, it pops to the top of your email inbox. At least with email, you can think a few days about your response before answering.

Similar to discussion threads in Blackboard. There is some similarity to the discussion threads on Blackboard. Each main post is called a “wave” and sub threads are referred to as “wavelets.” There are several easy ways to reply to a wave and add wavelets. In fact, other waves and previous waves can be added into a wave discussion. They show up as a link under the subject title of the original wave.

Combinations of platforms. Google Wave combines forums, wikis, chats, IMs and microblogging like Tweets into one package. Google Wave is designed to embed pictures, documents, YouTube videos, and other social media like Facebook and Twitter right into the wave. However, while we were able to click through links in the URL to get to a YouTube video, we were not able to actually embed it into the wave, as the instructional video claimed was possible. Conversely, waves can be embedded into websites and published in blogs. The waves will still keep their editable, collaborative features even when added to these other platforms.
Participants. Waves are shared and anyone can modify any part of the wave. Participants can be added or leave the conversation at any point. We noticed that we were not able to tell if someone had left the group unless they wrote that they were going.

Playback option. You can go back into the history of a wave by “stepping” through the conversation. Even group members that were not present in the conversation can view the discussion. We found it a little cumbersome to have to click through it rather than have it just play through the past waves.

Storage. Google Wave is an example of cloud computing. It is stored on a central server rather than on a particular computer or passed from one PC to another as is email. The advantage is that anyone in the group can access the wave at any time. The disadvantage is that it is not independent of Google and thus not totally private.

Gadgets. Currently, there are three gadgets on the edit toolbar: gadget URL, Yes/No/Maybe gadget and the extension to Google Maps. Google maps extension worked really well and we thought it would be a useful wave gadget. The Yes/No/Maybe gadget allows group members to vote within a wave. It would be a particularly useful tool for group decision making. We could not figure out the gadget URL gadget.

Extensions. Similar to the gadgets, but not on the edit toolbar are “extensions.” Google is encouraging developers to create these apps so waves could even do more. We really liked using the “When do we meet?” extension which has a calendar where everyone in the group can enter whether they are able, unable, or might be able to meet on various dates. There’s a tally at the bottom. Everyone in the group can then see what works best for the most people.

Another extension that we tried out was the “grocery list” extension. We were able to make a joint grocery list in real time. Having done this activity with a wiki before, I think having it in real time is definitely an advantage. Of course, everyone has to be on at the same time to get that added benefit. My daughter pointed out that you do loose the social camaraderie of physically getting together to plan a menu. However, the grocery list extension would be particularly helpful when the group members are not in the same town. So there are some advantages and disadvantages.

Google. Google is very smart in providing this high powered collaborative/communication tool for free. Its competitors like Microsoft’s SharePoint charge for such service (Ovadia, p. 158). As opposed to Microsoft Office where users have to purchase updates, Google upgrades its products for free. Also, it’s important to understand that Google makes its money by selling advertisements on platforms like Gmail and YouTube. Thus, Google wants to bring us to those money generating products. Therefore, you have to have a Google account and Google Wave is tied to your Gmail.

Waves for librarians. The biggest benefit to librarians is the collaborative functionality. Librarians are expected to collaborate with each other and other people whether or not they are in one location. When scheduling meetings becomes difficult, librarians can effectively use this tool if everyone has a Google account and Gmail.
It seems that Google Wave might be useful in a public context where public waves could be used by librarians and patrons to discuss various topics of interest. It would also be another way to promote library services and get feedback from the public (Stuart, p. 32). At this point, there does not appear to be any means of blocking participants. That seems to be a concern that Google will probably address.

Google Wave seems more like a chat format than a word processing system so it is important to decide what the user wants for the final outcome. In other words, it is a good collaborative tool but the final product might not be in a publishable format. This might be an important consideration for academic librarians.

**Conclusion.** Google Wave is still a work in process. It was fun to play with. It has some advantages and disadvantages. It has a fairly steep learning curve. Since Google Wave requires users to have an account and Gmail, usage will be limited until more people join the network. It will be interesting to see if Google Wave becomes popular.
References


