



Checking the Kids' Homework Over the Internet

Growing Web-Based Software Helps Parents and Schools Peek at Lessons, Share Records

After his divorce, Gregg La Montagne found it hard to help his 15-year-old daughter with her schoolwork since she lives in another state. So for her Spanish class recently, Mr. La Montagne told her to write her assignment in an online word-processing application made by [Google](#) Inc.

Mr. La Montagne, a sales manager in Austin, Texas, then accessed his daughter's homework on line, using the same software through his Web browser at home. A native Spanish speaker, Mr. La Montagne was then able to suggest grammar changes, which he typed in at the bottom of the paper. His daughter, who was on line at the same time, was able to see her father's notes almost instantaneously as her screen refreshed, and then in turn correct the document for him to see.

"It makes it easier to participate," says Mr. La Montagne, 50 years old. "It's not the same as being with her, but it's at least a step in that direction."

Mr. La Montagne is one of a growing number of parents now using Web-based applications to review and aid their children's educational work. Google Docs & Spreadsheets, which Mr. La Montagne used, provides word processing and spreadsheets that a consumer can access using just a Web browser.

Such applications are part of a broad move toward so-called hosted Web applications, where software and documents are accessed over the Internet rather than stored on your hard drive. (In the case of Google Docs, for instance, the files are stored with Google.) Many of these applications are free and allow multiple users to access and edit documents simultaneously. Businesses are already shifting some key operations, such as sales and accounting systems, to Web-based applications, citing lower costs and fewer hassles.

Now some families are seeing the benefits of hosted applications in their own way. Free Web-based calendar programs from [Yahoo](#) Inc. and [Microsoft](#) Corp. allow busy family members to share schedules online and notify each other of future events. Parents and



teachers are using blogs and collaborative Web sites called wikis with kids. And schools are sharing academic data with parents via password-protected online programs.

Some families are even using Web-based applications targeted mainly at small- and home-office users, such as AdventNet Inc.'s Zoho.com, a majority free system that offers things like word processing and online presentations. Raju Vegesna, spokesperson for Zoho.com, says Zoho is seeing an increasing number of students use its word processor. Today, roughly 30%, or 100,000, of its users are students, he says.

All of this is part of a larger trend of using the Internet as school aid. Indeed, homework has become the top reason that teenagers are using the Internet on a monthly basis, according to a November 2006 JupiterResearch LLC study of 2,091 teens in the U.S., ages 13 to 17. Social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook ranked fifth in the survey.

One concern with this type of close online collaboration is the temptation to help kids too much with their homework. Parents say they must guard against that, because it would be so easy to simply go in and make changes themselves.

During a visit to Utah earlier this year, Kate Hargadon, a Sacramento, Calif., student, didn't have her computer with her but had an essay due for a history competition in her home state. Having already written a draft on paper, the 14-year-old used her uncle's computer to type out the draft in a Google document. She then worked on it with her father back in Sacramento, who was logged into Google Docs at the same time.

Steve Hargadon, an educational consultant and Kate's father, says he was cautious not to help his daughter too much. "It wasn't my job to do it for her, but to help make sure it was getting done," he says.

He pointed out places in the essay where his daughter could rework the grammar, and she fixed them herself. "It's really convenient to use when you aren't right next to him and in a different state," says Ms. Hargadon, who says she now regularly uses Google Docs for schoolwork.

Such programs require little technical expertise, though users must create online accounts. With Google Docs, the programs are accessed via a secure user name and password. Users can invite others to edit or only to view documents. Both the Docs and the Spreadsheets programs alert users that others are making changes, which reduces risk of collaborators working on top of each other, says a Google spokeswoman. Changes appear onscreen almost instantaneously as the screen is automatically refreshed.



Google accounts are limited to 5,000 documents no larger than 500 kilobytes and 1,000 spreadsheets no larger than roughly one megabyte in size. Google says accounts are not removed due to inactivity.

"Teachers have started to see the benefits of bringing online tools into their classrooms to engage their students," says Jonathan Rochelle, product manager for Docs & Spreadsheets at Google.

"We've seen examples of teachers using Docs & Spreadsheets to manage their own information like grades and assignments as well as new ways to provide feedback to student essays and tests," he says.

Parents who home-school are also turning to Web applications. Lynn Aleshire of Anchorage, Alaska, who home-schools her 18-year-old daughter, recently used Google Docs and some browser-based office software from Zoho.com to help her daughter manage a high-school civics and government course. Using Zoho.com, Ms. Aleshire created an online to-do list of assignments and a timeline to help keep track of her daughter's progress in the class, which was a requirement for graduation.

"She likes things in order [so] having this timeline in Zoho was perfect for her," says Ms. Aleshire of her daughter.

Parents are also using Web-based applications to simplify other school-related tasks, apart from homework. Since June, Bernie Thompson, a free-lance software developer and board member of a parent-teacher-student association in Bellevue, Wash., has used Google spreadsheets with other parents to organize volunteers for events such as book fairs and carnivals. Before that, the PTA used a regular Excel spreadsheet, which parents couldn't access to see when they should sign up for an unfilled slot. With Google's application, which other parents can log into and update, the process is much easier, says Mr. Thompson.

Some teachers say Web applications can help increase collaboration in the classroom. Vicki Davis, who teaches accounting and computer science in Camilla, Ga., has assigned group projects to her high-school students using online word processor Writely and Google Docs since late 2005. (Google acquired Writely in March 2006.)

Since then, Ms. Davis says she has seen class participation increase and her students do more innovative work. In one project, she had her students individually create a business plan, letter or flier in Microsoft Word and then do it again in teams of three using Google



Docs. Then they had to write a blog post about the differences between the two. Ms. Davis says the assignment's object was to teach kids how to use new software. She says her students squealed when they found out multiple people could edit a single document at the same time.

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Web-Schooled				
A look at some Web-hosted applications that families are using to manage homework and school schedules.				
Program	Cost	Features		
Google Docs & Spreadsheets	Free	Accessed from any computer via a username and password. Users can invite others to edit or		
Zoho.com	Majority Free	Offers word processing, spreadsheet, calendar and online presentation applications. Also has Web conferencing and allows users to create collaborative Web sites.		
Yahoo! Calendar	Free	Web-based calendar that lets Yahoo! Members share schedules. Can be accessed from any computer via username and password.		