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Getting Acquainted with Free Software

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Abstract: Free software applications are available for most computing tasks. This article presents three examples of free software and describes how they could be useful to an Extension educator. The applications discussed in this article are Freemind, Doodle, and KPlato Project Management. Freemind is a concept-mapping tool. Doodle makes online polling easy, especially for scheduling events with multiple people. KPlato Project Management allows users to create and manage project plans. By using at least one of the three software applications discussed here, Extension educators should be encouraged to explore other free applications.

Introduction

The term "free software" refers to the freedoms afforded software users to "run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve" (GNU Operating System, 2008). One of the most well-known and widely used free software applications is the Mozilla Firefox Internet browser; however, many other applications are useful for daily Extension work. In fact, the national e-Extension initiative uses the Moodle platform for its learning management system (e-Extension, 2008). This article reviews three free software applications by describing common uses for Extension educators: Freemind, Doodle, and KPlato Project Management. Freemind is a concept-mapping tool. Doodle makes online polling easy, especially for scheduling events with multiple people. And KPlato Project Management allows users to create and manage project plans.

Freemind (2009)

Concept mapping is a nominal group technique process that allows individuals and groups to study concepts by seeing relationships and patterns. In Extension, it has been used for program planning (Duttweiler, 1991) and evaluation (Wheeler & Szymanski, 2005). While several commercial products are available for concept mapping, a free alternative is Freemind. The Freemind software includes graphics to enter and arrange relationships between and among over-arching ideas and related concepts (referred to as "parent" and "child" concepts, respectively, in the software). The example shown in Figure 1 is a concept map for a professional development course in "Avoiding Burnout."

Figure 1.
Example Concept Map Created Using Freemind



Doodle (2009)

Doodle is a software application that helps you to poll a group for a given topic such as availability for a meeting. First, the software allows you to set up a poll or possible event dates. Then, it creates a URL to share with participants such as via email. Finally, it tracks participants' responses. A recent extension is that Doodle may be used in conjunction with Facebook social networking site (Doodle, 2008). An example of poll results for new 4-H volunteer leader training is shown in Figure 2.

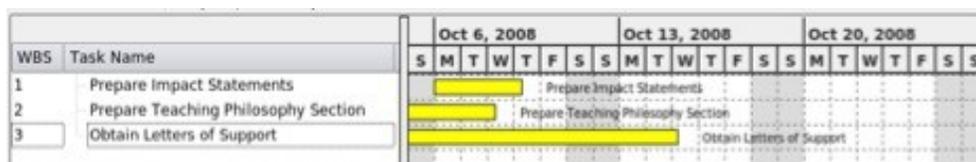
Figure 2.
Example Poll Created Using Doodle



KPlato Project Management (KOffice Project, 2009)

KPlato Project Management allows you to create and manage projects with flow charts. You input your major tasks and milestones, including the estimated risk of meeting a given deadline. This tool helps to visual represent the project and its progress. The project may include as many details as necessary, such as start dates, milestones, and deadlines. The example shown in Figure 3 represents tasks associated with completing a dossier.

Figure 3.
Example Flow Chart Created Using KPlato



Conclusion

Freemind, Doodle, and KPlato Project Management have much potential for the computing needs of Extension educators in concept mapping, polling, and managing dates/deadlines. Exploring these three free applications will help Extension educators to achieve greater effectiveness with their computer and to develop a greater appreciation for free software.

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