

The Contemplative Mammoth

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Six ways to use Google + Hangouts for academic productivity

Posted by Jacquelyn Gill · January 2, 2013 · 7 Comments

Filed Under Google +, outreach, social media, teaching, writing

There are a lot of great posts on why Twitter and blogging are two excellent forms of social media, and why academics– including scientists– should do outreach (I like this series of posts by Christie Wilcox). While outreach is great, there are some very selfish reasons to use social media tools for collaboration and productivity. I've recently been turned on to Google +.^{*} If you haven't had a chance to explore (especially recently), I urge you to check it out. It's more– much more– than Google's answer to Facebook, and Hangouts are more– much more– than Google's answer to Skype.

If you have a Google account (Gmail, Google Drive, etc.) you can quickly transform that into a Google Plus (aka G+) account. Once you have that, you can use Google's various features like Drive (formerly Docs, et al.) and Calendar in a nicely integrated platform with the social networking half of the package, G+. In fact, I'd argue that even if you don't think you need another social media platform, it's still worth joining G+ for the cool features like communities and hangouts.

I'm a postdoc at Brown, but I have potential collaborators all over the world (many I've met through other social media outlets like Twitter). We don't get to interact as much as I'd like, which is a bummer. Additionally, there aren't many paleoecologists where I work. Basically, G+ can act as a sort of virtual journal club or lab meeting, allowing me to have meaningful and productive interactions with long-distance colleagues that are easy, effective, and– best of all– free. Here are some examples:

1) **Journal clubs.** What's so very cool about G+ hangouts (versus Skype) is that they can accommodate up to ten people at once for free, and others can watch from the sidelines. Use this feature to generate your own virtual journal club (make sure you advertise on Twitter for maximum social media effectiveness). This is especially useful for folks who might be the only scientist of their kind at a small institution, people on sabbatical, people on ma/ paternity leave, or folks who are otherwise feeling a bit isolated. Some evolutionary biologists have already done this, to great effect.

A physicist, a chemist, and a paleoecologist walk into a bar...
(Thanks to @DrMRFrancis and @DrRubidium, my lovely models!)

2) **Podcasts.** Another great feature of G+ hangouts is the ability to record a conversation (either through Google or a third party), for use as an interview or a discussion in a podcast; you can save it automatically as a YouTube video afterwards. This is really useful for low-budget podcasting. You can also go “on air” and broadcast the live event well beyond the ten-person limit in the hangout. Check out Breaking Bio for a great example.

3) **Collaboration.** Create a private “community” with collaborators, and schedule your meetings using G+ hangouts instead of Skype calls or conference calls. Why? Well, first, I’ve found that G+ hangouts tend to be higher-quality and less buggy than Skype. Secondly, Hangouts have very cool integrated app features, including the ability to *work collaboratively on Google Drive documents during the Hangout*. Yeah, you read that right. You can also use a virtual whiteboard app like Cacoo to collaboratively draw out your ideas or workflow. The Symphonical app allows you to create tasks, use virtual sticky notes, or other get-’er-done tools for task management. You can even reward particularly good ideas with applause sound effects using Google Effects.

4) **Writing accountability.** Having writing partners—accountability—increases your productivity, whether you’re finishing your PhD or submitting your fifth grant as a tenured faculty. Use G+ Hangouts to start a writing accountability group. Set tasks in a shared Drive document and track your progress. Meet biweekly and commiserate. Share your work-in-progress via Drive, and get feedback. Give yourself a crown with Google Effects when you get a paper accepted.

5) **Presentations.** Start a Hangout and share your screen, like in Skype, or use SlideShare to give a practice presentation to colleagues from afar. This feature could easily be used for a number of other applications, like giving online tutorials (shared On Air, which you would then save as a YouTube video for posterity). Or how about a public dissertation defense?

6) **Virtual office hours.** (Thanks to @DrRubidium for this idea!) If you teach an online course, want to be accessible to students who may have schedule conflicts, or hold office hours while you’re away or working at home, you can use a G+ hangout. You can upload an assignment to go over in Google Drive, or sketch out a tricky diagram. You can even create a special Community for your classroom, and store important documents, lecture slides, or YouTube videos of past lectures.

Do you use Google + Hangouts as a tool for academic success? Did I leave anything out? What are you thinking of trying? Feel free to join the conversation in the comments, or add me on Google +. **Edit:** Also, see this great blog post by Jason Goldman, when G+ first launched. And see this series and conversation by Google developer Ronnie Bincer on G+ Hangouts for collaboration and presentations.

*Lots of folks have valid criticisms of Google, which I won’t go into here. The purpose of this post is to share some ways in which Google— and specifically Google + Hangouts— can help you with tasks that thus far there are no other effective online alternatives for.

Discussion

7 Responses to “Six ways to use Google + Hangouts for academic productivity”

1. Great write up re. the Academic’s perspective of Google Plus Hangouts.

I love how this tool (Hangouts or Hangouts on Air) can be used by so many different people in so many different ways! I’ll be sharing this article with some members of my family that are from the world of Academia like you. This should help them get another perspective and help them embrace the possibilities even more.

I’ll also connect with you on G+ as I am quite active there as ‘the Hangout Helper’ and perhaps I can lend a hand when/if needed. See you ‘around’.

Posted by [Ronnie Bincer](#) | [January 4, 2013, 5:40 PM](#)

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- Thanks, Ronnie! I appreciate the offer of help, and will definitely let you know if collaborators or I have feedback for how to make Google Plus hangouts more effective for our niche. I have to say, I’m very excited about Hangout apps, and look forward to seeing more folks using and developing them.

Posted by [Jacquelyn Gill](#) | [January 4, 2013, 5:53 PM](#)

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- Awesome... thanks for the mention in your article about our mini-series. The collaborative capabilities in Hangouts is mind bending! You not only can all work on a doc together at the same time, you can be having a verbal/visual conversation while doing it no matter where each member is physically located... as we say on G+ ... Awesomesauce!

Posted by [Ronnie Bincer](#) | [January 4, 2013, 6:31 PM](#)

2. Great recommendations!

Posted by [Ethan Perlstein \(@eperlste\)](#) | [January 3, 2013, 11:04 AM](#)

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- Thanks! I’m glad you found them helpful. It would never have occurred to me to use hangouts in these kinds of ways until I saw a few others using them, and now it’s become a big part of my collaborations.

Posted by [Jacquelyn Gill](#) | [January 4, 2013, 5:54 PM](#)

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3. Great tips! I've used Hangouts for virtual office hours with my students, and it worked really well. I've also used them to give a lecture to my class when I was away at the last GSA meeting in Charlotte. We've also used them in our senior seminar course to connect our current students with some of our alumni. Those video chats were great for students to get to know people who were at one time sitting in the same chairs they are in and have crossed over into the "real" world after graduation. I also use Google Docs/Drive to share lecture notes & assignment documents with students.

Posted by [Charles Carrigan](#) | [January 3, 2013, 12:15 AM](#)

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- Glad to hear that this has been working well for you. I also like the video chat idea—seems like a good way to get guest scholars into a classroom, at least virtually!

Posted by [Jacquelyn Gill](#) | [January 4, 2013, 5:54 PM](#)

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