

Chapter 10

Wordle...just for phluff?

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I have been using a fun (and quite popular) online tool called Wordle (<http://www.wordle.net>). Wordle is a Web 2.0 tool that produces images of word collections, as known as word clouds. For example, I created a Wordle image as a main page graphic (sometimes called a course banner) for one of my online courses. The following is a simple word cloud that summarizes what I write about on my professional blog, Thoughts on Teaching (<http://thoughtsonteachingjdunlap.blogspot.com/>):



Note: For a larger view, see <http://www.wordle.net/gallery/wrdl/336976/thoughtsonteaching>

Different Ways of Creating a Word Cloud in Wordle

You can create a word cloud with Wordle in one of three ways: (a) You can create a word cloud from a list of terms; (b) You can create a word cloud by entering a URL to a blog; or (c) You can create a word cloud from tags used in a del.icio.us account. Once you create the word cloud, Wordle gives you a few options to be able to change the look and feel of the word cloud (note: play with the “Randomize” button to see different options). Once you are happy with your word cloud, you can print it and/or save it to the public gallery. Wordle also provides the HTML code needed to add the word cloud to your blog or home page.

In the example, some words – such as teaching – are larger than others because they are included in the word list more frequently than others. To illustrate, if I were creating a Wordle image to represent the concept of baseball, my initial list of terms for this concept would include: baseball, bat, field, hat, player, umpire, glove, stadium, fans, hotdogs, popcorn, etc. This list would produce a Wordle image in which all of the words were the same size, indicating that they were of equal importance in

understanding the concept of baseball. However, from my perspective, the word baseball is more important to understanding the concept than hotdog or popcorn. Therefore, I would modify the list as follows to make sure baseball was the most prominent word in the Wordle image: baseball, baseball bat, baseball field, baseball hat, baseball player, baseball field, and so on. With the revised list, the most frequently used word is baseball, so it would be the largest word in the Wordle image. In this way, I can easily illustrate word strength and importance within a list of words if desirable.

Instructional Uses of Wordle

While Wordle is fun and can be used to produce course banners, Wordle can also be used for other instructional purposes. For example, I have asked students to produce Wordle images that represent their understanding of a reading, topic, concept, or idea. Then, I ask small groups of students to debrief their images together to discuss what terms they selected and why, why some terms are larger than others (or what terms should be larger than others because they are more important), and so on. A variation is to limit the number of words students (working as individuals or in small groups) can use to describe a complex concept (e.g., constructivism, freedom, diversity), and have them create a Wordle image that captures the essence of the concept with exactly 20 words. I have also used it to create word collections and asked students to determine how the words are connected, and what topic or concept is described by the collection. These types of activities encourage students to reflect on a topic or concept and articulate their understanding based on that reflection.

Wordle can also be used during class introductions, specifically in online courses. Instead of asking students to share a bio, students can produce a Wordle image that summarizes who they are, likes and dislikes, hobbies, and so on. Again, it is a fun way to encourage reflection, articulation, and sharing.

So be sure to check out Wordle! Whether you use it to produce images for your online courses, to spice up your PowerPoint presentations or for any of the reasons I mentioned above, I am sure you will find that Wordle is not only fun and creative but can be a great instructional tool for your online and face-to-face courses.

Bio

Dr. Joanna Dunlap is an associate professor of instructional design and technology at the University of Colorado Denver. An award-winning educator, her teaching and research interest's focus on the use of sociocultural approaches to enhance adult learners' development and experience in postsecondary settings. For over 13 years, she has directed, designed, delivered and facilitated distance and eLearning educational opportunities for a variety of audiences. She also works in the Center for Faculty Development as the Faculty Fellow for Teaching, sharing ideas about teaching with online and on-campus faculty across the university.