

Transcript for Developing Connected Writing Using Obsidian
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Educational Technology Users Group
Presenter: Glenn Groulx

FACILITATOR:

Our next speaker is again, coming to us from elsewhere. So Glenn Groulx is a professor at Coast Mountain College. I was at Coast Mountain College last year, and it's a beautiful campus up there in Terrace. So he's going to be talking about Developing Connected Writing Using Obsidian. Take it away, Glenn.

GLENN GROULX:

All right. Well, welcome, everyone. Doing a sound check quickly here. Is the sound pretty good? Okay, you can hear me then. Yeah, we can hear. Excellent. I'd like to start off with Obsidian using this tool for digital journaling. I wanted to start off with Walter Ong's quote, "Everything is related to everything else." This becomes even more apparent when you look at this screen. I mean, you have a whole bunch of tags on the right side. On the left side, you have files and folders, and in the middle, you have your workspace, which can be split off as well in terms of slides. Now, for now, I'll just very quickly go over one thing I want to mention, and that is where it's coming from. Well, my name is Glenn Groulx. I have a bachelor's degree in education and a master's degree in distance education as well as some background in ESL. I teach university credit in English at Coast Mountain College. I just wanted to start off with what is this thing? It is a note-taking interface. It connects ideas and media of various kinds. It is a PKM, a personal knowledge management system. It is stored on a local PC. It is absolutely free as a download. There are plenty of community plug-ins. It is a very, very versatile tool to create and expand your ideas. There's lots of room, as I said, to grow and develop your skills as your needs emerge.

Now a little bit of background, the tour of my personal vault. Well, this is a tiny piece of the vault and there are several vaults, and that's one of the things is that it is secure on my own local desktop. I basically started uploading 25 years of old files from various devices, and I wanted to take a look at them again and see if I can repurpose them, revisit, revise. I began that process and I needed something that I could use that would keep it all in one place and make me able to see the connections, and I'll show that to you, hopefully it'll be an animation. I could show it to you. I started with what I call a small portion of a couple of hundred documents, and these were archived, some of them are more recent, some of them less. So I'm now incorporating newer stuff, new learning projects and research topics, and I'll show some of those momentarily.

So I'm using a graphic view, and I'm going to click on something to show you the evolution of the learning space. This is the learning web that I've been creating. And so these are a number of files, file names, tags, and it'll grow and grow and grow and grow. And this is only maybe a couple of months of me actually moving a series of files over to something like this. I use this in

between classes to prep. I use it for general thoughts on topics I'm interested in, whether it be podcasting or maker ed tech of any kind. I put that in here. I have video annotations, I have articles. But it's so much nicer to be able to see, oh that's interesting. Look at that one there. That's facilitating online connective communications. I wonder what that's about. Looks like there are quite a few of them connected. Okay, yeah, I have some stuff I need to revise or make an example. This gives me a nice visual representation of the files. And now I just go back to my original. Back. There we go. So I'll just take a look at the chat very quickly. Oh, that's already. My apologies. All right. So I'm going to click off click on that. There we are.

So this is one example of a personal vault, and I want to just emphasize four with time permitting. This is a very quick overview of Obsidian. I would love to go into it in more detail. But really, what are the benefits? It fosters knowledge building. It promotes ownership. So many students, as you know, go in and they submit their assignments, and that's it. They go into the LMS and they submit it to the Dropbox. That's it. Well, here's an opportunity where they can build and build and build and revisit and rework. It encourages connective writing, and it enables the use of what John Dron talks about with soft techniques. And I'll get into that.

What about this knowledge building? Well, let me just make it a little cleaner here with a preview for the slide show, and then I'll just close this up. This is not very pretty, but we'll give you an idea. This is my idea of using Obsidian as a presentation tool as well. It's great for sharing. It's not great at the moment for formatting. But again, knowledge building. As I said, it's a localized personal knowledge management system, facilitating connections and simplifying reorganization of ideas. So any one of these types of tags, I can take a look at them. The tools I have can help me organize ideas, files, folders, pages. Okay. But then I have tagging. I have nested tags. I have bookmarks. I have outgoing links, backlinks, unlinked mentions. So all the content grows and grows further.

Ownership is promoted. Authorship is promoted. It records multiple iterations of notes. You can summarize, you can evaluate, you can paraphrase content. You can link it to each other. You can have little sticky notes, virtual sticky notes that connect to each other through tags. You can embed links from various sources, add quotes, footnotes, citations, etc. So there's an academic feel for it as well. There's informal writing. You can link to other articles, websites, podcasts, presentations, photo files, videos, other multimedia contents. It's very versatile.

Connective writing. Well, we'll talk. Again, I mentioned drawn John Dron, and I'm also mentioning Terry Anderson from *Teaching Crowds: Learning and Social Media*. Obsidian encourages connective writing. It requires learners to adopt a more reflective stance, taking time between the spaces between the learning, between the class time, to take a reflective stance and work with their own ideas as well as bringing in ideas of others, as well as incorporating content. Obsidian then empowers students to develop skills, processes as well, so that they become more autonomous self-regulated lifelong learners. This is their stuff. This is their own self-authored independent stuff, and it doesn't have to be evaluated. Shared,

absolutely, would be great. So learners using Obsidian over time independently engage in an internalized dialogue with a very distant tutor. And I'll go into that in a little bit more time here.

They talk about soft techniques and how Obsidian really facilitates that. The more we use Obsidian, as you can see here, for actively connecting our ideas, our minds change by using it. Recursively, we change how we use the technology. So Dron talks about adjacent possible emergent paths. We learn more and more about that as we develop hard skills, how to use all of this. But then we have the soft techniques that emerge as we use it more and more. There's an additive process. So it plays a part in our cognition. The key here is leveraging our thinking to new and different levels. It's very intriguing and interesting from this perspective.

That's me. Now, that's the slides, but I wanted to show you with time permitting. I'm going to check my time. Okay. I got some time here. What else can I do with this? Well, just this morning, I thought to myself, you know, it wouldn't be cool if I could find out some more content, and here it is. Here's an example of taking some annotations. Some examples are coming up here. John Dron put together a video from a presentation called the "Intertwined Teacher." I better read that fast, "Intertwined Teacher." I put some notes together, these are the things I'd like to work on. I did a little bit of a brief summary. I've introduced some highlighting. And then I made some extra note-taking here. I can right click on it, and I can literally control, well, let me see. I can highlight it, I can change it. I can format it. I'll go into that in more detail. So it introduces hard techniques. And in here, I can change. I'll just do this now. Now maybe change the font there. There we go. As I go along, you can see the mark up there. There we go. So I can do mark up on the fly. Every time I look at it, it changes. That's the whole nature of it, isn't it? So I have some pedagogical methods. This is interesting. I definitely want to look further in this. What is this complexivist? I'm not even sure if that's the right spelling. I have to look at it again. In terms of the softest techniques versus less soft versus a harder technique. All these different methods are applied in various ways. Anyway, I'm really interested in this comment. "We learn amongst a sea of learners," and then I made some commentary. So this hasn't been tagged yet. Oh, boy, so I better put this in a tag just to make sure it's connected. There we go. Okay. What else? I better put it as maybe connectivism. Let's see. Connective writing. That's fair enough. And so I'm able to go back again and again and think out in terms of the connections. All right. Next is, I will just go to close the slide view. Close the Intertwined Teacher and then go to Obsidian coding.

All right. Same idea. Here are some things I've learned in terms of how to go about doing the coding. When it comes to linking with internal and external links and so on, note views, text editing, and I've got a whole bunch of things. You can have quotes, you can embed audio files, images, lists, checklists. Hot keys are really cool. Inline code. I love the idea of inline code when I start working on our Arduino or Python or whatever it might be, any kind of Python code or any kind of code in general, you can embed as inline code. You've got callouts. I use these callouts sometimes just to help me. Footnotes for more practical footnotes and notes. These are very useful for almost academic writing. And then, hey, this is really helpful in terms of

study circles, etc. I've got a number of resources there and an example of a footnote. These are just some examples. And I'll close this one. I think I've gone through this one.

Okay, again, you have examples of tags. Let me just check my time. Hey, lots of time. And so I've got a markup tutorial. This is an example of a little bit of annotations here. I can do this with Tutorials. I identify, Hey, I got to identify who it is. What's the commentary from my perspective? What's my take on it? What are some tags I find useful? What are some takeaways for me, and then something called Thinking and Linking. That's actually a link. And so on. So you've got that one and then you've got the next one.

All right. Again, this is a simpler example. But here's an example in which I've been working material. This is old material, and I'm just reworking it for demonstration purposes for Obsidian and look at the processes. So first, again, I have tagging. This one is a big one. I'll show that to you in a moment. I've got tag paraphrasing citations. All of them are different types. So I say, Well, what happens when you click on this? What happens is that on the left, it gives me all the results from Revise. And again, you can tell I'm in the process here. There are quite a few. There are almost 60 files. So then I can take a look at any one of these and rework them, retag them, relink, review, etc. Coming back to the beginning, let me just take you back. Through linking coding details, the tutorials And I need to go to I'm going to go to ETUG. Okay. How do I get back? I click on Files, and I'm back to files. So I'm going to go to, I think that's the one. Yes. Perfect. So you could navigate within here, and I got. Oh good, I got some time. So I'm going to show you these other options. You could record. You can open up the command palette. You can have the slide show. You can create canvases, daily notes and journaling, if you want to do that. You can run a local backup. These are just some examples. Again, I can navigate between volts, not just this one. Okay. Now, under settings, I'm just going to comment on one thing, and that is the range of community plug-ins. So I'm going to browse just to give you an idea of the range. There's currently... I'm not sure. Hopefully, you'll see this. There's 1,647 plug-ins. These are all independently created. And I've already, as you can see, hopefully you will have seen that I have a templator. I have slides for presentations. I have a planner. But there's an annotator in here. There's a home page. There are checklists. So you can do a huge amount. So okay. Thank you. So this is just the beginning of providing independent learning options. It's a learning tool for those individuals who want to go beyond just writing for the classroom. So that's my presentation. Thank you very much. Hopefully, there's some questions, and I'm going to stop sharing. Thank you.

FACILITATOR:

Thank you so much, Glen. I wanted to maybe open with a question. So this idea of sort of a personal knowledge system is there ever examples out there other than Obsidian?

GLENN:

Okay. Yes, there are from the perspective of a number of different note-taking options. There are also some hard copy, I think it's metal casting, as a theory for keeping notes together. Now, there is also. Oh goodness. I think it's... I'm not sure of the names of them, though. But I've

found Obsidian as very useful for myself when I had a whole bunch of content to bring together.

FACILITATOR:

Great. Okay. There's a question in the chat. This question is from Dana Buick, and she says, "Hi, Glenn, do you envision using Obsidian as an assessment tool?"

GLENN:

Well, I wouldn't. Insofar as that it is very personal and there are certain elements that could definitely be utilized. But if you try to translate it to an LMS, the formal LMS, there could be some problems with it. Insofar as if, for example, in my own case, if I were to try and take that content as it's presented, as it's formatted and put it into an LMS. It may not translate very well. It may not show all of the tags in the same way. It certainly won't be used in that particular way. If I click on the tags, it won't show all the other content connected to it. So it won't necessarily be useful as it stands. You can take pieces out of it and use it for the LMS or for a form or for a blog. But Obsidian is much further along the way of creating multiple options for connecting ideas than even a blog. My background in academia is having done a master's degree on the development of my own skill set in blogging. So it's not that easy. You would have to try to graft it. You can't do it. You can't graft it into another format. You'd have to take bits and pieces of it. But in itself, it's quite useful for demonstrating connections, demonstrating ideas, and it will maybe help in terms of mini essays. It may help for annotations, for example. It may help for a number of different options for how you could utilize the content inside it so that students can present it as part of assignments.

FACILITATOR:

Some questions in the room. Ducking and weaving here.

PARTICIPANT:

Hi. Thanks for the presentation. My question is, can instructors, for example, have some of the articles or videos or audio? I mean, the course content in Obsidian and then share the link with their students so that students can interact with that material. And because it's a note-taking tool, I was thinking about how you compare it to a hypothesis as well. And then another question was, does it have AI functionality? Thank you.

GLENN:

So connecting, trying to think in terms of hypothesis versus Obsidian. Hypothesis is very, very nice as a plug-in for WordPress, and it is very versatile in its own way. The thing is that Obsidian does quite a bit more when it comes to organizing your knowledge management system for yourself as a learner. So it is intended as an individual tool. Trying to graft it, perhaps someday they will graft it or use it as part of an LMS. I don't see that right now. In terms of AI, yes, they are beginning to, as I said, those community plug-ins are developing ideas all the time to address these issues to address AI. Now, again, the whole point of connective writing is for the individual to do their own work in a hopefully quiet space in their own walled garden and not

have to say, I'm not doing it for performance, for grading. I'm doing it because I want to. Now, ultimately, it will lend itself at some point to performance where they share it online. So that's a different area. This is about creating a space to enable them to work through these ideas on their own. So AI, and I'll mention John Dron's mentioning is very roughly paraphrased, is that it is a tool and should be treated as a tool. It is not a replacement for critical thinking, at least not yet. Hopefully not. But again, Obsidian provides that platform for us to take some time connecting ideas, especially ideas that are new or ideas that are old and reconnecting them in a more meaningful way today. I hope that thing is about the connection with hypothesis. The other one is, I apologize. I don't remember the second part.

FACILITATOR:

I think you covered it. Yeah. Okay. One more question.

PARTICIPANT:

Thank you, Glenn. I really love the idea of making those connections much more visible. It was a great demonstration of that. But I was wondering if you could maybe provide some examples. Like, are you using this with students? How and what kind of challenges? I think that the locally hosted aspect of this might make it quite challenging to use with students.

GLENN:

Yes. So a couple of points. I think that there are certain takeaways or certain ways of using Obsidian for student work in terms of teaching them the hard skills, how to actually do hyperlinking and tagging and so on. This is going to be useful in their lives for when they get into WordPress or when they publish in publishing platforms. However, the LMSs in place today don't really enable this option. So as I said, you try to graft this into a classroom setting, with group work, etc. It will require sharing this content. And the fact is with blogging and with Obsidian or any kind of personal knowledge management, it is tied to the individual's choice. So it is voluntary. And so you can choose to try to help them out and provide options for writing. But the bottom line is, this is a voluntary tool. It's not to be enforced upon. You can't get them to blog. You can't get them to do Obsidian if they don't want to. That's my take on it. So what's the point? Well, the point is that eventually it will spill over into LMSs at some point where the connections start to be made. The compelling evidence for the benefits of connecting ideas of this kind. Some elements may well be moved over to the LMSs at some point, but not quite yet. Also, it's moving in all kinds of directions. The current as of today: 1,600. 1,600 community plug-ins. So there's more to come.

FACILITATOR:

Okay. Well, thank you so much, Glenn. We're just about at noon. We'll thank Glenn again.

GLENN: Thank you very much.