Interview | Time for Schoology

The initial idea for Schoology came about during college when three friends, Jeremy Friedman, Ryan Hwang and Tim Trinidad tried to develop an effective platform for sharing lecture notes with everyone in the class. After two weeks of development, the project gained traction, but not in higher education; rather, K-12 students began actively using the service and teachers began reaching out. “It got us thinking,” says Jeremy. “The learning management system that our university relied upon handled the basics just fine, but missed so many opportunities to be a more collaborative and more effective tool for both professors and students he says. In K-12, the problem was even larger, since most schools didn’t even have learning management platforms. “Why not create a platform for K-12 that looks and feels like the tools people use outside the classroom, but contains the functionality of a learning platform?” Jeremy asked. “Better yet, why not provide a platform that could be implemented in a single classroom with teachers and students, or implemented on a school-wide basis without any cost or friction?” Great questions, and with those, the next thing they knew, Jeremy and his co-founders set out to make the vision a reality.

What does the name mean?
In the Greek language, the “logy” suffix is used to identify core knowledge about a specific theme—sociology, theology, etc. And the word “school” is an instantly recognizable term for any place of learning, whether it’s a traditional elementary school classroom, a virtual university, or even a cooking school. So, what better name to use for a collaborative platform than “Schoology”?

What is it?
Schoology is a collaborative learning platform, combining the course content and functionality of traditional learning management systems with the immediacy, access, and connectivity of social networking tools.

The layout looks familiar. What does it do and what are the benefits?
Schoology allows teachers to securely and efficiently conduct tests and quizzes, host discussions about course materials, provide supplemental insights on daily lessons via blogging, offer one-to-one feedback on assignments, assign and collect homework, and expand in-class learning by sharing supplemental content and linking to additional reference materials. It also provides a safe and secure area for students to communicate and collaborate. As the platform is cloud-based, it essentially renders the three o’clock dismissal bell obsolete in terms of access to learning. All students and teachers need is a computer with an Internet connection.

By upgrading to the enterprise level version of Schoology, school and district administrators gain access to customizable system settings, permission controls, and branding features. Equally important, the enterprise version offers the ability to migrate individual teachers from their solitary Schoology platforms to one singular, shared one that opens a window for across-the-board performance reporting and analytics. And since Schoology is cloud-based, it’s completely online. There’s no software to install, no extra equipment, and no maintenance required. It’s safe, secure, private and protected.
Its layout resembles the look of popular social media tools, so it’s comfortable and familiar—and easy for technology novices to quickly learn and use.

The greatest benefit to Schoology is the stronger connections and collaboration it fosters among teachers and students—and their parents. By enabling parents to sign in, too, Schoology encourages more frequent communication with their child’s teacher, ultimately boosting parental engagement in the learning process, a critical component of every student’s success.

How is it unique from other similar products/services? What companies do you see as in the same market? There are many, many education technologies available that address specific needs within the learning marketplace, including some that overlap with bits of what Schoology offers. The vast majority, however, aren’t hitting the mark with respect to what educators and students need in terms of accessibility, integration, and basic functionality. They simply aren’t keeping pace with innovation.

Early products were developed with just the administrator in mind, making them clunky and difficult to use. More recently, a number of companies have emerged with solutions that focus solely on niches, such as teachers, students, or parents. Schoology is unique in understanding the need to create a product that is fun, familiar, and easy-to-use for students, teachers, and parents alike. Equally important, it provides specific features that administrators say matter most, such as critical third-party technology integration, scalability, and enterprise-level controls, data reporting and customization.
What are some examples of it in action?
Teachers across the U.S. and as far away as Malaysia use Schoology in countless ways every day to connect not only with their own students, but also those in other classrooms by working with other teachers on shared learning projects. It’s helping to power more than 60,000 courses and delivering more than 150 tests and quizzes an hour.

Who is it particularly tailored for?
Schoology is a platform that helps people teach and learn more effectively and efficiently. One of its greatest advantages is its flexibility in terms of the context in which that learning takes place. Although we are focusing our marketing efforts right now on the K-12 space, Schoology is equally suitable for—and is being successfully used by—colleges and universities, virtual schools, and even corporate users like Groupo who need a reliable, accessible vehicle for delivering uniform training to its geographically dispersed workforce. As long as you believe in the meaningful role that technology can and should play in reforming the outdated classroom-only, 9-to-3 traditional approach to learning, Schoology is the platform for you.

Schoology’s thoughts on education these days?
Clearly, everyone at Schoology shares the vision that there is a meaningful, beneficial role for technology in the classroom, and that there is a need to reshape, reform, and renew outdated teaching approaches that are no longer aligned with the reality of the way students—people of all ages, actually—learn today. It’s not just occurring in the classroom, and certainly not solely between the hours of 9:00 and 3:00. Technologies like Schoology that allow for anytime, anywhere learning and instruction reflect this paradigm shift and rightfully so.

How does Schoology address some of your concerns about education?
Educators know that it takes more than lessons on “reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic” to give students the well-rounded, practical education they need to thrive and be successful. The world has evolved and will continue to do so, and modern educational theory and practice has to keep up. That includes not only what we teach, but also how we teach it. As I said earlier, even though K-12 education is still formally blocked out in most districts for weekdays between 9-3 pm, students’ learning cannot be similarly contained. Thanks to the Internet and the ubiquity of cellphones, laptops, PDAs, and the like that enable people to access unprecedented amounts of information within seconds. The education sector shouldn’t ignore that fundamental reality. Instead, they need to harness these innovations and leverage ways to capitalize on the opportunities technology presents. Schoology does exactly that.

Schoology’s take on the future of education?
It is clear that Schoology’s vision for enhancing the learning process through the adoption of innovative technologies that fuel greater engagement, collaboration, and communication among teachers, students, and parents is very widely shared.
Key Benefits for Teachers:

- Fast and easy access to classroom and district resources; anytime, anywhere, and on any device
- Intuitive tool for district, school, or grade level/subject area communication and resource sharing
- Online warehouse for any type of digital learning material: documents, video, audio, or content from curriculum publishers (e.g., digital textbooks or supplemental materials).
- Opportunity to eventually reduce common, time intensive activities every year such as:
  - Reduced need to make multiple copies of assignments, classwork and homework materials
  - Reduced need to locate and copy materials for students who lose their papers, forget their homework, or who are absent
  - Reduced need to spend additional time with students and parents of students who’ve forgotten their assignments
  - New opportunity to:
    - Save time by not having to reproduce the same lessons, copies, communication documents and learning materials every year
    - Save time by providing a place for students and parents to easily retrieve materials, assignments and classroom communications online instead of being solely responsible for ensuring physical copies make it home and don’t get lost or forgotten
  - Consistent design makes it easy for students and parents to navigate the Schoology environment regardless of grade level, classroom, or school site

Key Benefits for Administrators:

- An easily accessible repository for materials, communications, handouts, instructional resources, schedules, policies, procedures, emergency documents, and other digital assets important for daily operations and instructional leadership
- Ability to leverage the online Groups feature for professional book studies, PLC’s, grade level, subject area, or task specific resource sharing and communication
- A digital hub to organize and link to other online resources including documents created in Google Apps, Office 365, or many other 3rd party applications
- Ability to easily provide a school or district level container of vetted, common core aligned instructional materials that can be organized by grade level, subject area, standard, or any other structure

Key Benefits for Parents:

- Access to your child’s (children’s) classroom events
- View daily classwork and homework tasks
- See your child’s participation in classroom discussions
- Consolidated information pertaining to your child
- Access events on your child’s calendar
- Easily toggle between all your children and access their information from your home page
- See Updates on your child’s school events
- View list of school faculty with link to their email