

## Reflection: Using GMail in an educational setting

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MEDT 7462- Module 3

I remember when email first came to our school. The old-timers swore they would never use it and the young teachers weren't sure how it was useful except to write to family that lived out of state. Nobody quite knew how it would work in a school environment.

We were lucky. We had a principal at the time that embraced email whole-heartedly and decided that all of his communication with the faculty would be electronic. Suddenly, if teachers wanted to keep up with what was happening in the building, they *had* to use email. Before long, it became a necessity.

Now, teachers collaborate with colleagues, parents, and students dozens of times a day with email. If it goes down for some reason, my office phone rings constantly until it comes back up. People love their email.

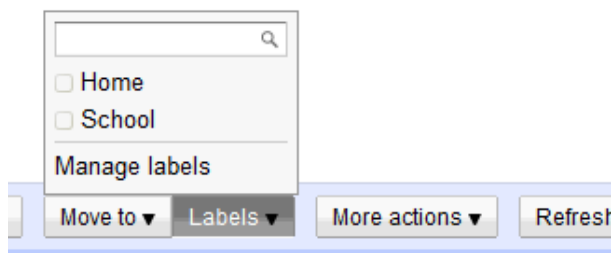
I'm one of them. Today, we use Microsoft Outlook (the full version, not the wimpy "express"). It's a program I've gotten comfortable with and I can do just about anything I need to do within its menus and options. I have a work email, a home email, and a business email... but I've always stayed clear of the "free" email alternatives. I still remember the days when a free email account (Hotmail comes to mind) was a sign of an amateur or a spammer. As such, I never gave GMail more than a passing glance.

It's nice, though. Much nicer than I expected. I should have known that Google wouldn't put its name to anything less. I've always been happily surprised by the quality of Google's free suite of tools.

In looking at using GMail in an educational setting, I can immediately see a great number of positive uses. First, it's free... which is always a huge draw to bring teachers and students onboard. This makes it a tool that can be easily given to students, allowing them all of the benefits of email communication with each other and their teachers. There are ads, of course, but they are a lot less intrusive than most websites online these days.

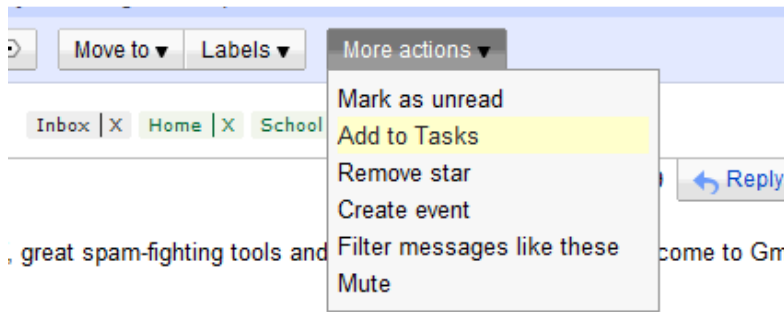
Once students and teachers are aboard, there are several tools in GMail that would benefit a learner. Three stood out for me.

### 1) "Labels"



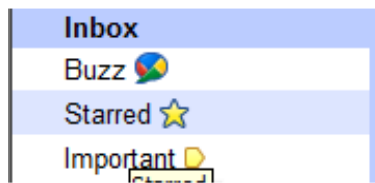
In Outlook, we have the ability to tuck messages away in folders when we want to save them. In GMail, I like the alternative. Users can "tag" a message with a label in much the same way you would drop it into a folder, except a message can have as many labels as you want it to have... which is a big advantage over the one-folder option.

## 2) Task List



Nothing beats a good old to-do list. You can have all of the electronic organizing tools in the world, but it all boils down to a checklist of things you've got to do. Gmail has a handy (and simple) Task List built in... perfect for helping students keep track of assignments that need to be turned in.

## 3) Stars!



In Outlook, they are "flags". Gmail calls them "stars". Whatever the name, these are imperative for the person that gets a flood of email (like a teacher) and needs a reminder that they need to get back to a message that they just cannot reply to at that moment. With emails coming in from administrators, parents, and students, it is easy for things to get lost in the shuffle. Stars are a good way to tag messages you need to return to later.

Final thoughts:

GMail is free, which immediately gives it a big boost over its competitors. Add in the suite of slickly designed tools (and connectivity to the other great Google products), and you have an email system that would be more than enough for any school (administrators, teachers, and students).