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# Using Google Web Apps to Improve Student Engagement

By: Lloyd Willis, PhD

In general education humanities courses, at least two problems seem universal:

1. How to blend the teaching of content and the teaching of critical thinking skills that are transferrable to other fields
2. How to encourage student participation and engagement

For years, my typical approach to these problems has been to “flip the classroom” and make my students more responsible for their own learning. I have minimized my lecturing and used carefully crafted discussion questions and small group in-class assignments to move my students through critical thinking processes as they unravel the complexities of literary texts.

As is always the case, however, there is never a perfect solution. Some content must be delivered to the class, some students resist buying into a course that doesn’t directly contribute to their career training, and some students resist injecting themselves into classroom discussions whatever form they take.

My most recent strategy to combat these challenges has involved using Google’s Web apps, specifically Google Docs and Google Slides, to facilitate in-class discussions and collaborative projects. There are many Web apps, presentation platforms, and collaboration tools that are more elaborate and flashy, but the Google products are easy to use, with interfaces familiar to anyone who has ever used any word processing or presentation application. They are also free, and are universally available to anyone with virtually any type of smart device.  
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To create any whole-class collaborative assignment, the instructor merely needs to create the Google document, give it a name, and then send a link to students that will allow anyone who accesses the document through the link to edit it. Full instructions on how to do this are [available here.](https://support.google.com/docs/answer/2494822?hl=en)

One of my tried-and-true teaching strategies is to present my class with a series of discussion questions that need to be answered over the course of the class. Traditionally, I have put students in groups and then talked through the topics and questions after the groups have had time to become “experts” on the issues while madly scribbling our conclusions on the board or typing them into a word processing app being projected on a screen. In this way, our discussions have some structure and students have an idea what I came to class considering important—we may add to that list of important topics, but they at least have some starting points. While this approach gives students some agency, everything still inevitably moves through the professor.

Putting my discussion questions into a shared Google document, however, opens up several possibilities. Instead of groups engaging their tasks at their naturally varying speeds and then enduring the lag time while everyone reaches a stopping point so that the whole class can engage in discussion, the class moves more smoothly as everyone simultaneously works on the collaborative document together. Students in each group see what the other groups are doing, which usually improves quality across the board. Students can insert questions and comments into the document that they may not have offered aloud in an en-masse discussion. This method even improves the experience of the small groups; instead of the inevitable situation in which several people huddle around one person who records their conclusions, each member can easily make his or her own contributions—like five students at the front of the room writing on the board instead of one person writing the thoughts of the rest of the group.

#### Getting started

To anyone who wishes to experiment with these strategies, I would recommend following a few simple guidelines that I have learned through trial and error:

1. Encourage students to sign in to Google with their own accounts (most of my students already have accounts, and it’s free to create one for anyone who may not) and adjust their settings so that they are not completely cloaked behind a name like “anonymous wombat.” This tends to minimize some of the tomfoolery that can ensue when dozens of people simultaneously collaborate on a project—just imagine jokes, ironic comments, and sarcasm running amok beyond any professor’s control!

That said, because some students will willingly participate anonymously but remain silent in the open, I will allow students to hide their identities if it makes them more comfortable, but by pairing this latitude with strong encouragement for the use of real names, I usually achieve a critical mass of openness that creates a more serious collaborative environment.

1. Because the online collaborative space feels so amorphous, it helps to provide clear and specific instructions for any online collaborative assignment. In a recent American literature class, for example, I asked my students to collaborate on a Google Slides presentation that provided historical context for modernist literature. The students were split into groups and asked to provide at least three slides on a topic I provided: technological developments of the period, political developments of the period, social developments, and so on. Each group was required to embed three media objects, from images to sound or video recordings.

In my teaching, I have simply incorporated Google Web apps into teaching strategies that I have already used—group projects, class discussions, and content presentations. Because of the flexibility and universality of these online tools, it is highly likely that they could be adapted to improve student engagement in classrooms and subjects that are significantly different from my own.

Lloyd Willis is an associate professor of English at Lander University.