Google Drive: Facilitating Collaboration and Authentic Community Beyond the Classroom

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“In digital spaces, collaboration might happen via e-mail or instant messaging, or it might happen through a course-management system discussion board or some other space for sharing writing. Writing, at every stage of the process, can now be shared across time and space instantaneously to get prompt response. Thus, the nature of digital writing is such that it both invites and, in some sense, demands instant feedback.” (National Writing Project, 2010, p. 23)

Imagine facilitating deep discussions about young adult literature in an online space. If you are like us, you ask yourself what that might look like. How can I do that in a way that maintains the integrity of the discussion models I use in classrooms? How can discussion occur when it is not synchronous and I am not there to guide it? This was the dilemma we faced in trying to model critical literacy literature circles (CLLC) with practicing teachers in the online space of Google Drive.

The development of critical literacy in readers is an important goal for many teachers, and numerous texts have been written about it (see Appleman, 2014; Comber, 2015; Fain & Craig-Unkefer, 2015; Ives & Crandall, 2014; Janks, 2014; Morrell, 2015; Street, 2014). We, too, have conducted research into ways to advance students’ abilities to read through a critical lens (Vásquez & Dail, 2018). The goal of this article, however, is to focus on the organization and management of extending in-class conversations or beginning new conversations in an online space outside of class.

The Context

The inservice teachers in this project were graduate students at a state university enrolled in an online English education class focused on theory and practice in digital media with the goal of introducing them to digital strategies to use with their own young adolescent students in face-to-face or virtual learning. Since there is too little time in the classroom day for in-school discussion, we offer Google Drive as a tool to help teachers facilitate learning and collaborative work among students outside of school.

The objective for the lesson we are sharing to meet this goal was to engage our teachers in analyzing texts through a critical lens by implementing the four dimensions of critical literacy described by Lewiston, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002): disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action for social justice. Because of our critical literacy approach, we selected the young adult novels Tyrell by Coe Booth (2006) and Saint Iggy by K. L. Going (2006). While introducing multiple issues to problematize, both texts focus largely on the subject of young adolescents living in poverty, a circumstance typically depicted as a static, entrenched condition characterized by large numbers of children, chronic unemployment, drugs, violence, and family turmoil (Wagmiller & Adelman, 2009). These commonly held stereotypes are what we hoped to disrupt using critical literacy. Consequently, we focused the learning in Google Drive on reading and discussing the two novels.

Teaching Online

The class utilized Google Drive as a learning platform. Drive engages our teachers in participating in a free online platform they can implement with students to facilitate writing and collaborative learning in their own classrooms. It offers several affordances for this type of learning. Affordances are the advantages a tool offers on “what we can do, what we can mean, how we can relate to others, how or what we can think, and, finally, who we can be” (Jones & Hafner, 2012, p. 5). Drive allows users to work either synchronously or asynchronously in an online environment. Whereas
online discussions are often threaded and stilted, Google Drive allows users to access each other’s documents—not just conversation posts. It allows multiple users to compose in one document. It also offers additional tools such as a comments feature where users can create visible conversations around the work being produced. These features change how students relate to each other and how they can think about their work when compared to a traditional out-of-classroom collaboration.

Drive is a dynamic platform that allows a variety of formats to be included. We created a class folder in Drive and invited all teachers to the folder, giving them editing permissions. Editing permissions empower all users to create and respond to documents within the folder. We used a folder system within the main folder to organize the class for easy navigation, modeling for teachers how they might set up their own class folders for their students in Drive (see Figure 1). Folders were organized primarily by modules where each module folder contained all of the materials associated with the topic. Module guides (see Figure 2) were created using the Docs feature, which opened a word processing document where we could enter information, including tables and images. We organized the module guides around assigned reading discussions and learning activities corresponding with the topic. These paralleled what we would do with students during a face-to-face class meeting. Modules also included document formats such as PDFs and video files. All of these can be placed in the folder where students have direct access. Teachers created their work for the discussions around Tyrell and St. Iggy within this Drive space. They collaborated in groups for discussions and used documents within the class folder to assign themselves to groups by typing their names (see Figure 3). They used these documents to share individual prewritten responses and to discuss the work within the Drive folders.

Drive allows users to view a revision history for each document, showing who contributed what and when, a feature valuable to classroom teachers when evaluating collaborative work. This feature also allows users to revert documents to an earlier format.
Engaging Students in the Learning Activity

Early in the course, we introduced teachers to the concept of critical literacy by reading and discussing Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluy’s (2002) article. In support of the reading, teachers watched an explanatory screencast presentation we posted in the module folder. This screencast explained the terms and ideas presented in the article. Teachers also signed up over the course of the semester to prepare discussion questions on assigned readings. They submitted these to us the week prior to leading the discussion of the module they selected so that we could help them refine the questions if needed. Teachers then posted the questions in a table we created for students to respond to the discussion. After reading and viewing the material on critical literacy, teachers chose two questions and responded to them (see Figure 4).

While the table format can become a bit crowded, teacher feedback indicates they like the more authentic flow it creates for dialogue. Strategies our teachers employed to facilitate the ease of participating in class discussions included choosing a font color for writing their responses in order to make them visually discernable from others’ comments and using the comments feature in Google Docs to engage in discussion around each other’s responses. The highlighted text indicates that there is a comment on that portion of text in the margin of the document. As instructors, we also used the comment feature to reinforce, question, and encourage depth in students’ responses.

Each teacher self-selected a role for the CLLC. The roles were designed to hold the teachers accountable for completing the reading and related work. The different roles provided teachers with opportunities to practice analyzing from various points-of-view.
and allowed them to share their thinking about their roles through journal responses. Teachers shared their journal responses in a second folder within the larger module folder. Within this folder, each group had a folder so that their materials were located in one place where they could collaborate.

While the teachers participated in the activities in these modules, we, as instructors, facilitated via comments within documents and emails. We also kept notes about trends we observed in teachers’ responses, places they needed more clarity, and questions they had. We collected questions teachers had via a Google Docs checklist they completed at the end of each module. Teachers’ responses on the checklists were then viewed collectively as a class or individually (see Figure 5). After looking at the information we had on teacher learning from each module, we provided them with feedback.

**Shifts in How Teaching Looks in Google Drive**

When we first began working with teachers online, we struggled with questions of maintaining what we know to represent pedagogically sound practices in our classes. We came from classrooms that center on discussion and involve our students in assuming various roles as learners and learning facilitators in the class, and we committed ourselves to maintaining these social practices in online spaces. What we learned is that it takes much more active work on the part of the instructors than we initially imagined because they have to be visibly present within modules on a daily basis. Students need to see their instructors actively commenting on and reading what they are writing. A constraint of online platforms (Jones & Hafner, 2012) is that writing becomes the primary modality for students to represent their thinking and learning, making these spaces very writing intensive, especially in the discipline of English. Moving forward, we are looking at other digital tools that will allow students to share thinking in modes other than writing in order to add variety and lift the writing burden.

Organization within the class folder needs to be clear, and students will need some time to tinker and get a feel for navigation. Maintaining consistency in folder construction and organization across classes and modules is important so students can navigate easily as the year progresses. Note that items within the modules will default to alphabetical order in Drive, so as you add content to your class, the content will shift on the screen. To solve this, we use an alpha-numeric system to make items within the class folder static. For example, each folder has a letter in the main class (see Figure 1, p. 25), and folders within it have that letter followed by their number. This tells students the order in which they should work through the materials.

**Google Drive to Extend Classroom Space**

Because Drive is a free online platform, students need a smartphone, tablet, or computer and a free gmail account. We recognize that not all students have this access. In these instances, we recommend using the school or public library computers. Also, tablets obtained through donations or small grants can be assigned to students.

Even before moving to online course delivery, we worked with preservice and inservice teachers face-to-face and started experimenting with Google Drive, Google Docs, and Google Hangouts. Drive creates a
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References


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Connections from readwritethink

In this series of lessons, students create an online portfolio of their best work and respond to each other’s work online. Teachers create a basic class website from which to link to each blog or a folder for them in Google Drive. This fosters an online community in which students can easily move from blog to blog to view and respond to each other’s content.

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