



Tool Tip: Using Google Docs to Encourage Collaborative Learning Outside of Class

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How many times have we, as teachers, waded through a stack of grading, working to provide valuable feedback on homework assignments, only to have students give our comments a cursory glance before stuffing it into their already crammed backpacks? I have seen this time and again in my own classes, always thinking that there has to be a better, more effective way to encourage students to become more reflective about their work. I began to reflect on the assignments I was giving, and the lines of communication between teacher and student that develop through the homework. In the traditional method of pen-on-paper assignments, teachers create the activity as a way to elicit specific practice of a particular skill, opening the dialogue. Then each student completes the work and submits the assignment, thus responding to the initial questions from the teacher. The final step in this communication cycle comes with the teacher providing feedback on the student's work, thus ending the dialogue. In this structure, the student is responding only to the teacher, attempting to give the teacher the correct answer to the question.

When I compare this closed communication cycle to the open-ended, reflective style of engagement that I encourage in the classroom, it is no wonder I see such a disconnect between the two styles of communication. In the classroom, students work within a collaborative environment, experimenting with the language, listening to the experimentation of others, asking questions and hearing various explanations from their peers as well as their teacher. Students work in pairs and groups to analyze information and together with their peers produce work in which multiple students from multiple learning styles have collaborated. Not only do students have the chance to receive feedback from their teacher, they are also opening the dialogue up to multiple other information streams.

In order to more accurately replicate this type of collaborative work environment, I have been experimenting with various technology tools as a way to make homework a more collaborative experience. One tool that I have found to be especially successful is Google Docs. The idea is simple: instead of the one-student-one-paper model I have relied on in the past, I have implemented a one-paper-many-collaborators approach. Not only are students contributing their answers to the questions posed in the assignment, they can also see the work of their classmates. This offers students the opportunity to measure their own understanding of the questions with that of their peers. It also provides motivation for students to "up their game" in terms of critical thinking and creating high-level, academic work.

Sample Lesson

I used the following lesson in a recent level 4 grammar class.

Step 1

In-class: Students worked in groups to practice the target grammar structure by comparing universities of their choice from the following website: <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/compare-colleges>. We then discussed as a class students' own reasons for choosing to come to KU.

Step 2

Out-of-class: Students were asked to come up with a list of questions for an interview they would be conducting with KU students about why they chose KU. Students were asked to create questions with different structures according to the corresponding charts in their book.

Rather than have the students do the assignment individually, they were asked to type their questions into the group document found at this link: <http://goo.gl/5Aj80w>.

Students were not required to write their name, but I did ask each student to write his or her responses in a different color. Although the document can be accessed and edited from the web, only those with the link can access it. In other words, it is neither public nor searchable on the web.

Step 3

In-class: Students accessed the group sheet, now filled with the student-created questions. They were then given a set of criteria with which to evaluate each question:

- Is the question grammatically correct?

- Does the structure of the question match the example from the chart?
- Does the question fit the context of the assignment?
- Is the content/structure of the question academically appropriate?

Once students had evaluated the questions based on the criteria, we discussed which questions best fit all four. With a little tweaking of the grammar, these became the questions we chose to use for the next step of the assignment, the interview.

Follow-up Activity

For the final step, students used the questions to interview two American KU students and write down the responses. Students used the responses in the following class to write a short comparison essay (again focusing on the target grammar) based on the results of their interview.

Results

This activity worked especially well due to the wide variety of L1 speakers represented in the class (Portuguese, Chinese, French, and Arabic) and the variation of skill level within the class. Lower level students could see solid examples of the type of language expected of them in an advanced grammar course, while the higher level students had the opportunity to analyze and provide explanation of grammatical structures. All students had the opportunity to revise and edit the grammar in order to express the ideas in a clearer, more concise way. Now that students understand this collaborative homework process, I hope to incorporate this approach more as the semester progresses. My overall goal is to help each student in the class become more reflective in terms of their writing and grammar. My secondary goal, however, is to see fewer comments tossed aside by students into the endless abyss of their backpacks.

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