

Section B

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How a Google Spreadsheet Saved My Literature Class

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A FEW YEARS BACK, I did a teaching experiment: I made a concentrated effort to keep every student's attention for a full 80 minutes. I delivered my opening lecture with soaring Shakespearean command, then immediately broke students into groups to pursue the perfect discussion question. I had them. But then I asked them to transcribe their responses onto the whiteboard mounted at the front of the classroom — a clumsy process that took 15 minutes. And there, I lost them. One student at the back slipped in earbuds. Another began tweeting under his desk. Another fled, via YouTube, to the coasts of New Zealand. Were there no longer any solid walls containing our learning environment?

Because technology offers infinite glistening portals for escape, a challenge we face as instructors is how to keep students present — fully and richly present — in the classroom. But what if an answer lay in those very portals? What if, rather than banning technology from the learning environment, we could route it back in? Technology, culprit of so much mental absentia among millennials, could actually deepen their presence in the classroom.

Up until that class session, my only integration of Google Sheets technology into the classroom involved simple spreadsheets aiding course organization, such as assignment calendars and sign-up sheets. But for the next class meeting, I made a universally editable spreadsheet that students could interact with throughout the lesson. Now, through their laptops and gadgets, they could gain access to a living document, and see their responses projected onto the whiteboard at the front of the classroom in real time.

After my opening lecture, I gave them five minutes to write their group-activity responses. I knew exactly what they were doing now as they gazed into their luminous devices. In the same 15 minutes it once took to handwrite dry-erase hieroglyphs, students had progressed from lower- to higher-order thinking.

At the end of that lesson, I called this spreadsheet our “virtual board,” and my classroom has never been the same. Here are three other ways I've used the virtual board to direct students' minds back into the learning environment.

Teaching critical thinking. I use this virtual board to help students find their way into the central debates of Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise*. In the fictional town of Ruby, a historical monument bears the town's motto, but years of erosion and neglect have faded it, leaving only the mysterious phrase “... The Furrow of His Brow.” Townspeople and their religious leaders are divided over what the phrase means. Reverend Pulliam asserts that the phrase was surely meant to read “Beware The Furrow of His Brow,” while Reverend Misner argues that the opening word must have been “Be.” While the difference may appear inconsequential at first, what's at stake in the novel is, in fact, the difference between tolerance and religious violence. Which worldview — “Be” or “Beware” — must we indeed blame for the massacre that opens the novel's pages, undertaken bloodily in the name of God?

To usher students into this debate, I create a virtual board with a solid line running down the middle and three columns on either side — yellow, red, and blue — that relate to the two viewpoints under discussion. Students, who are each assigned a row labeled with their name, begin by using the yellow columns to paraphrase the conflicting viewpoints, identifying associated concepts, characters, and symbols in a passage I read out loud to them. They move next to the red columns, where they must cite passages in which Morrison explores the deeper theopolitical worldviews (concerning divinity, humanity, authority, community) at work in the “Be” and “Beware” stances. We then pause to discuss their findings.

As I helicopter around the classroom with my tablet, I read what students are writing, and I nudge two of them for elaboration. There's no space for anyone to hide.

Finally, students move to the blue columns, which ask them to discern which stance the novel seems to advocate, and why. The virtual

board's layout, then, scaffolds progressively from lower- to higher-order thinking — from basic comprehension to critical analysis. For homework, students return to the virtual board, where they must stake their own position on the matter: Do they agree with the conclusions drawn by Morrison's novel, and why?

This setup electrifies the conversation at our next class meeting.

Documenting classroom discussion. Now I'd like to keep a live transcript of that ensuing conversation. In the past, I used to hand-scribble one- or two-word summaries of students' comments on the front whiteboard. But I've since created another virtual board to serve this purpose. At the very top, I state our guiding question: “Do you personally advocate the theopolitical vision of Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise*? Does this vision capture the sort of society you feel to be ‘good’ or ‘right’? Why or why not?” (Students can also choose to answer “neither/both/other.”)

As their verbal responses erupt now from across the classroom, I use my laptop to paraphrase their insights onto the virtual board. I walk around, Socratically using my tablet's dictation feature to restate their ideas vocally into the virtual board. (They love this.) All of this is projected onto the classroom's overhead screen, and students have the board open as well on their laptops, so they can see their comments appear immediately. Finally, this version of the virtual board offers a downloadable discussion transcript that students can consult long after the class meeting is over, for papers and exams.

Structuring the writing process. Using the same spreadsheet as for the activities above, I add a new tab with a virtual board that's meant to help students craft strong and original arguments for their future essays. This virtual board has four columns: The first asks them to brainstorm three to five possible paper topics; the heading prompts them “to devise topics that don't rehash what we said in class but that launch into a direction all your own.” Because they can see everyone else's ideas as they write, virtual groups begin to form around thematic constellations. A group mind-set begins to form, mediated by the virtual board, and I am the guide on the side molding and shaping it.

The second column asks students to “Begin to commit to a possible topic to develop.” Importantly, this column heading also warns them not to simply parrot someone else's topic. Once again the virtual board empowers students to collaborate synergistically in real time. The third column asks them to “Exercise one another's arguments.” If two students have too similar a topic, they partner up to press each other's ideas into a more original direction; if two students are taking opposite stances, they hone their topics through the formative pressures of counterargument. They document in this column how they developed their ideas, so when I grade, I have a snapshot of the conceptual evolution of all their papers.

Students must secure my approval of their paper topic before moving on to the last of the four columns, which asks them to “Cite three substantial quotes (with page references) that you can use to develop your paper topic.” As I walk around, I readily identify students who are trying to pull quotes from SparkNotes.com, or out of thin air, and I work to help these students find their way into the assignment.

A simple online technology enables me to achieve in one class meeting what it once took me a full week of individual conferencing to achieve. The final term papers, showcasing original arguments and well thought-out arguments, turn into a fireworks display — and I'm proud to watch. ■

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