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Digital by Necessity

Scaffolding a Collaborative Humanities Classroom Online:
Pedagogical Tools and Techniques

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INTRODUCTION

In the post-COVID-19 landscape of higher education, I've been impressed to discover that the online environment, when carefully managed, actually *facilitates and improves* discussion, interaction and collaboration among students in humanities and communications classes. After nearly two years of online teaching, I can say with confidence that my online classes are on par with the best of my in-person classes—and sometimes even better. In this short article, I share the basic tools and practices that have served me well as I've worked on honing the art and craft of teaching discussion-based, writing-intensive classes online.

In March 2020, when like many others I shifted abruptly to online teaching, I was perhaps at a slight advantage: I already had my own Zoom account, on which I had been conducting meetings, and I was already familiar with Google Classroom. After attending some faculty training sessions hosted by the Bard Institute for Writing & Thinking, I picked up a third important technical tool for online teaching: digital, collaborative bulletin boards by Padlet. With these three tools, I have been able to successfully scaffold and structure many online humanities classes for Bard College at Simon's Rock and the Open Society University Network (OSUN).

Whether in-person or online, all of my classes are intentionally student-centered, discussion-based, and collaborative; I spend minimal time lecturing, other than providing an overview of the topic and class plan at the start of each class session, sharing information and posing questions aimed at enhancing discussion. Of course, I do shape the contours of the discussion behind the scenes, with carefully designed homework assignments. For both in-person and online classes, I often use Google Classroom's "Question" function for daily homework assignments, which is like a discussion board where students can see each other's responses.

USING ONLINE RESPONSE JOURNALS TO ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION

At the 100 or 200 level, I break down the typical response journal assignment into drafts that are initiated individually but then incorporate group class work that feeds into (and often improves) the individual graded response journals and papers.

Here is how I structure a typical daily reading response journal assignment[1]:

1. Read [assigned chapters]. What is your general reaction to this section of reading? What do you find interesting about this book, and why? (100 words minimum).

2. Select three passages from three different chapters in this section of the reading; explain why you chose them and what you find interesting about them. (3 quotes, 100 words of commentary about each quote).

3. Craft three discussion questions related to the passages you chose.[2]

4. Post your quotes and questions in the appropriate column on the Padlet for class discussion. Include page numbers if possible!
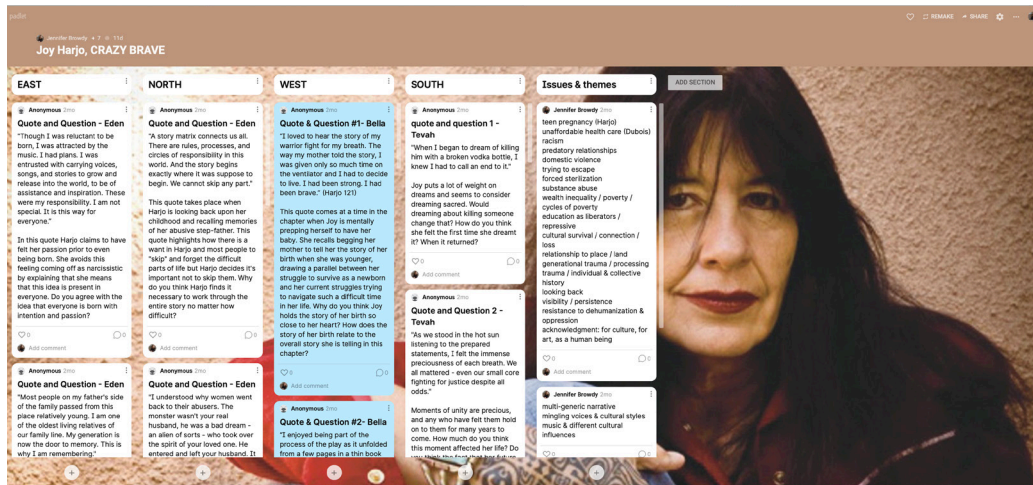

Figure 1: Sample Padlet layout organized by chapter

The last step of the response journal is key for the productive use of this assignment during class time. I set up the Padlet in advance with columns organized by chapter, theme, topic, or characters (see an example of this setup in figure 1). Students come to class having done their posting of quotes and questions for discussion, which they then share with each other in small groups[3], with one student sharing their screen so they can look at the Padlet

together. If a student has been assigned to lead discussion that day, the group will consider their quotes and questions first.

Students spend 20–30 minutes in their small groups, tasked with working together to refine each other's discussion questions, as well as to find relevant passages from the reading that support the exploration of those questions. From the large number of quotes and questions that have been generated by the class, they select those that they find most compelling and interesting to bring back to the full group, and we consider these in the last half-hour or so of class time, with me sharing my screen of the Padlet so we can all look at it together (see figure 2).

This sequence—individual harvesting of quotes and questions accompanied by commentary; small group discussion, refining questions and finding more quotes; full group discussion with faculty facilitating—improves students' ability to articulate questions and find passages in the text to support their exploration. The Padlet functions as a collaborative form of notetaking, which students can then draw on when the time comes for them to prepare their formal graded response journals and essays.
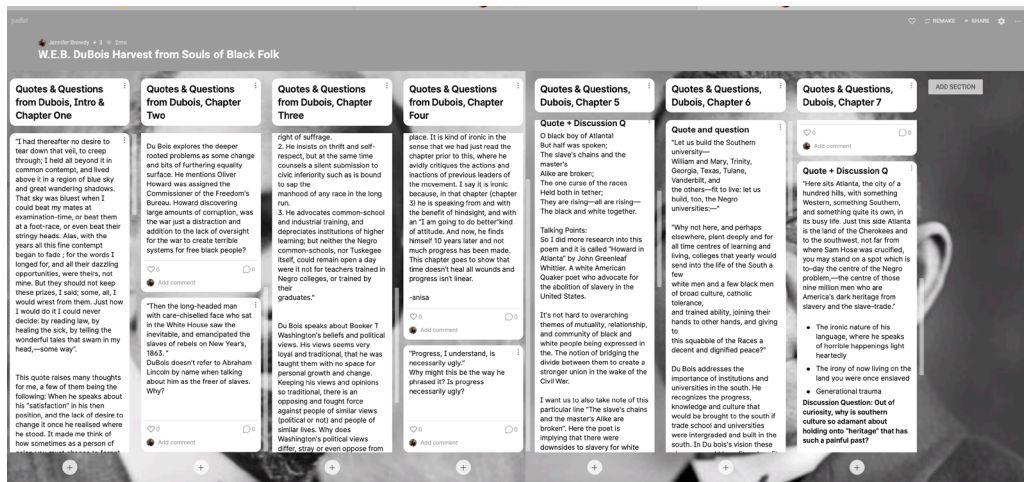

Figure 2: Padlet as a collaborative note-taking space

CREATING A HOSPITABLE ONLINE CLASSROOM CULTURE

I have found that little things can go a long way towards creating a lively, hospitable online class environment. For example, I always welcome the class with music using the "share computer sound" feature on Zoom, and I tailor the music to have something to do with the day's topic. I encourage students to share something about where they are in the world (the weather, their time zone, local holidays, etc.) and sometimes we start a class by getting up and moving

our bodies to music or breathing deeply together, so that we don't get too engrossed by the disembodied space of the screen.

I incorporate multimedia as much as possible, taking advantage of the ease with which the online environment accommodates sharing video clips and digital images. We can visit a museum together, or take a field trip using Google maps. I also often invite guest speakers to class. Even very small details make a difference, like changing the header on the Google Classroom or creating customized "wallpaper" for the Padlets, so that the visual graphic matches the topic of the day.

As anyone who has attended an online meeting knows, it can be tempting to turn off one's camera and multitask while listening. Making class time interactive, lively, and collaborative is the carrot to encourage students to keep their camera on; I also provide a clear policy[4] and keep track of their participation, including camera on/off, each day.

My classes are often focused on literature and communications strategies for social and environmental justice, and hence engage some sobering topics and longstanding struggles for human rights and equity in different parts of the world. I have found that students are generally very considerate of each other's perspectives and feelings, and eager to help each other find ways to talk about difficult topics in sensitive, productive ways. Constant rotation with different small groups in breakout rooms helps them to get to know each other quickly, and to develop trust in the integrity of the fabric of the group to hold difficult topics about which we feel deeply.

For my part, I get to know the students by dropping in on all the small groups during each class, and listening or offering some comments that may help guide their discussion. Using Google Classroom for assignments, I'm able to quickly offer feedback on the many low-stakes assignment drafts they post, guiding them to improve rather than focusing attention on where they come up short. I encourage students to meet with me after class if they have any questions, by keeping the Zoom link open at the end of class (breakout rooms can be created as needed for private discussions, while other students wait in the main room).

And I encourage the students to communicate with each other between classes by using the Google Classroom "Stream" function, which automatically sends emails to all Classroom registrants when a comment is posted.

SCAFFOLDING A SEMESTER-LONG RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT

With longer, research-based assignments, I also incorporate collaborative learning into the structure of the assignment. In my semester-long Inquiry Log

assignment, I have students prepare a weekly "log" of their research, written in a first-person narrative voice that describes the process of doing the research as well as what they found out (and of course includes in-text citations and a Works Cited list). These are posted on a Question thread in Google Classroom, so that students can see and be inspired by each other's research.

Every three weeks, we have a draft day where the students use the break-out rooms to present their findings to each other and refine the starting questions for the next stage of research. On these days, I start with having the students do some process writing in the first 10 minutes of class, before we go into break-out rooms to present. They can post their process writing as a "reply" to their own Inquiry Log, which is visible to everyone. I ask them to consider:

- What was the most important information you found? (bullet points)
- Your reaction to what you found out—how did this information land with you/how did it make you feel?
- What feedback do you need from your listeners, in terms of structure, content, sources, citation formats, etc.?
- What would you like to learn more about? What are your next steps for this project?

With this writing posted, I send them into break-out groups (again, intentionally mixing them up on each draft day), with the instruction to orally present their research findings to each other, and help each other out in figuring out next steps for the project. I ask them to use the Google Classroom Question to post written feedback under each group member's project, and I offer some structure for the feedback, in the form of these prompts:

- What interested you most about the information presented?
- What would you like to hear more about?
- Was there any place your attention wandered, that you were less interested? Can you say why? Was it the content, or the way the information was presented?
- Suggestions for form or content, using the formulation "Have you considered…?"

I've found that students are remarkably focused and helpful to each other in this small group work, and in their end-of-semester class process notes they've pointed to these sessions as productive and stimulating.

In the second half of the semester, the three draft days are focused on:

1. Finalizing the scope of the inquiry and helping each other identify weak points or loose ends, as well as pointing each other to new sources of information;

2. Helping each other craft the slide deck of visuals that will illustrate the final presentation[5];

3. A "dress rehearsal" day where they practice the full presentation in a different small group than the one in which they will give the final presentation, so that more students get to benefit from the information collected.

On the final presentation day, I ask the students to record their presentations[6] for later upload to Google Classroom for grading. This is important because I move around among the different groups on the presentation days, but ultimately I want to be able to see all the presentations.

STUDENT RESPONSES

Student responses to this assignment, and the digital humanities classes overall, have been very positive, as can be seen in the following responses from students in my Fall 2021 Women Write the World Bard/OSUN class.

A student from Kyrgyzstan:

> The class impressed me with its atmosphere of unity, creativity, and freedom. My first impression was that "we are all different, but share a lot of common interests and ideas." It stimulated me to participate and share my opinion during the class. Moreover, I liked to listen to others, as their opinions were different from mine, taking into account that we all were from all over the world . . . The class structure has been incredible and at the same time challenging, as it was a new format for me. During my other classes, we were assigned to listen to the monologue of the professor, read the chapter and answer questions after the chapter. In this class, I felt like I was encouraged to speak, and my classmates were willing to listen. I was never afraid I could make a mistake, as I felt every opinion mattered. Speaking and presenting my opinion was hard for me, as I was not used to it. Thus, I worked hard on presenting and explaining my thought . . . Overall, the class has been completely wonderful and useful for me.

A student from the United States:

> Overall, I think this has probably been one of my favorite projects that I have worked on during my time at Bard College at Simon's Rock. It felt invigorating to be able to choose my own topics to research over the course of the semester. It truly felt as though I was in charge of my own learning, though that came with some challenges . . . This inquiry log has allowed me to make my, and many other women's, voices heard, and this is something I'd like to continue to do with my writing, especially as I look at transfer schools for next fall. I want to be in an environment in which I can share information I am passionate about with the campus community, as well as the community outside of the

campus. This is especially true if I am able to help inspire other young girls, young scientists, to remember that they can do anything they set their minds to. This project has truly opened my eyes to different ways to spread awareness, rather than just through facts and statistics and research reports. I believe it will make me not just a better activist, but a better scientist, in the years to come.

A student from Bulgaria:

The Inquiry Log assignment is something that I had never done before. The challenges I encountered during the process of researching were mainly at an emotional level. I really tried to keep my emotions away from my judgments and argumentations, but it was so difficult. This is what distinguishes my IQL from all of the reports I read. The questions that I was asking were often dictated by how I felt about a certain finding . . . These past three months of reading, listening, watching, discussing and writing have taught me a lot about the topics that I dived into and the variety of processes involved in effective research. I also learned a lot about myself —about my hopes and goals for the future. Finding my purpose is something I see as my main challenge as a young woman and this class has helped me realize something. Life today is very materialized, with the main goal being wealth. But this would never be either a priority or enough for me. Of course, I want to add value to my personal life and the lives of my closest ones, but I also want to add value to my community.

FROM ONLINE TEACHING TO GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP: THE FUTURE IS NOW!

Online humanities classes offer the stimulating experience of students from all over the world sharing and learning from each others' perspectives. My Bard/OSUN remote classes have included students from Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Bulgaria and Kenya; in another class I had students from Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Brazil and Berlin, as well as various locales in the U.S. Carefully scaffolding the assignments led to in-depth small group and full-group discussions, while building steadily towards the final research project and presentations, which the students enjoyed and learned from both as presenters and as an engaged audience.

I believe that the future of higher education depends on faculty learning to offer high-quality, discussion-based classes online. These will benefit the entire world in ways we are only beginning to imagine, as young people overcome the old boundaries of nation and culture to become the global citizens our planet desperately needs now. It's truly an exciting time to be teaching online!

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APPENDIX

INQUIRY LOG PRESENTATION STORYBOARD

Main ideas or topics you will cover:

Image	Image	Image
URL/Citation	**URL/Citation**	**URL/Citation**
Accompanying Audio/ Words	**Accompanying Audio/ Words**	**Accompanying Audio/ Words**
Other Information (e.g. Duration, Transitions, Music)	**Other Information** (e.g. Duration, Transitions, Music)	**Other Information** (e.g. Duration, Transitions, Music)

NOTES

1   I grade these daily assignments on a pass/fail basis and then at the end of a book or topic, I assign a longer graded response journal, for which these shorter assignments are pre-writing. Students quickly see the value of collaborative learning and draft work, and it sets them up for success with the graded assignments. My typical response journal grading rubric is as follows:

> **Seminar Response Journal Rubric**
> 15 points total
>
> 2 points
> *Punctuality*: Your RJ is posted by the deadline
>
> 2 points
> *Legibility*: Your RJ is free of distracting errors of grammar, syntax and punctuation
>
> 3 points
> *Quotes*: You include the requested number of quotes from the primary text
>
> 5 points
> *Commentary*: You discuss why you find these quotes/scenes interesting, providing references to the text overall, on-going themes of the course, other students' comments in class discussion, outside but relevant reading/knowledge, etc. (aim for at least 100 words of commentary per quote)
>
> 3 points
> *Discussion questions*: You construct an open-ended question for discussion about each quote you chose.

2   I spend some time at the start of a new class helping students to become more aware of the importance of how they frame questions, and to understand the components of an effective discussion question (which also becomes an effective starting question for an essay or research project). I include this guidance in my syllabus:

> **A good question for discussion:**
>
> • Cannot be answered with a simple Y/N
> • Uses a specific quote as a springboard for open-ended exploration (there is no "right" answer)
> • Leads us further into a close reading of the text by asking about (for example) character development, specific plot points, themes and metaphors, etc.

- Invites us to make connections and consider relationships:
    - between this text and others, pointing to specific examples;
    - between this text and contemporary social issues;
    - between this text and other disciplinary approaches (psychology, politics, gender studies, etc);
    - between this text and your personal experience (go sparingly with this approach—no more than one of your three questions).

3   Be aware that the "automatic sort" function of the breakout rooms will generate identical groups each time, if you tend to have the same students regularly attending class. I am always trying to mix the students up intentionally, using the "manual sort" function. I simply take a screen shot of the list of the breakout room groups and use that as the basis for generating the groups for the next class.

4   This was my participation guidance on a recent syllabus for an online OSUN class: "Active class participation, including in-class writing and small group work, is required for this discussion-based class. Students who regularly come to class, keep their Zoom camera on, and are prepared to frequently and thoughtfully contribute to class conversations and attend to the contributions of others, can expect to receive full credit for participation. Students who often keep their cameras off, are often late or absent, are inattentive, or whose participation is not collaborative and informed by the readings may receive little to no participation credit." I also ask students to "lead discussion" once a semester, which essentially brings their response journal quotes and questions to the forefront of our attention on a given day, helping to ensure that everyone's voices and perspectives are considered.

5   See the Appendix for a form that students can use to help structure their large, semester- long research project into a manageable 10 to 15-minute illustrated presentation.

6   As host, you will have to go to the breakout room after it is opened and give each student permission to record locally on their own computers—this is an option when you click on the drop-down menu next to their names in the Participants box.