

How Can Google Docs Help Foster Productive Collaboration?

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James Lang, Ph.D.: Welcome to Magna 20 Minute Mentor on [How Can Google Docs Help Foster Productive Collaboration?](#) Most of us who teach in higher education recognize the value of group work and collaborative learning in our classrooms. But that means also that most of us know the problems that sometimes arise when we have students working in teams or using any kind of collaborative learning activities.

For example, sometimes you give a task to a group of students. And one group might finish that task in 5 minutes, while another takes 20 minutes. And then those students who only took 5 minutes are stuck talking about their weekend for 15 minutes. So sometimes the challenges, the logistical challenges of collaborative learning can get in the way of students doing effective work on task. And sometimes that also can prevent faculty members from engaging in a collaborative learning because they're afraid of these kinds of problems.

I'm Jim Lang, a professor of English and director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College and the author of *On Course: a Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching*. And what I want to talk to you about today is how we can use Google Docs in order to solve some of the challenges that sometimes arise in collaborative learning and in order to promote learning effectively in your classroom.

So the learning objectives we have for this 20 Minute Mentor are to understand how Google Docs can contribute to effective small group activities, to design appropriate assignments for Google Docs, and then to manage the basic features of Google Docs.

Let's begin by sort of going back to those challenges that I spoke about at the beginning. I see three primary challenges when I try to use collaborative learning in my classroom. The first is that students do sometimes complete group tasks at different rates. This can happen sometimes because students sort of want to just rush through and sit and talk afterwards. But it can also happen sometimes that some groups are just more efficient than others.

And that leads to this problem where you have three groups who are working hard and two groups who are finished and are doing nothing. And sometimes you can go to those other groups and give them additional tasks, but that really becomes a problem sort of managing the groups in the classroom.

A second issue that sometimes happens is that groups or individuals may wander off the task. And so groups might be doing something and then sort of get sidetracked and start talking about their homework or whatever

else that may be. We all know that this can happen with groups as well as individuals who may sort of check out and start working on something else other than what the group is working on.

This happens outside of class as well when we send students to do collaborative learning activities for assignments or projects or presentations. All the individuals may not contribute to group tasks. We have the case of sort of the free rider who wants to be able to sort of capitalize on the work that the other students are doing without actually contributing much to that work him or herself.

So these are all logistical challenges that can get in the way of learning in a collaborative environment and can prevent faculty members from using collaborative learning in their classes. Now in order to try and address some of these, I think we can use Google Docs effectively to help promote good collaborative learning in and outside of the classroom.

So the basic Google Docs is, Google Docs is available through Google. And it's open and free to anyone. You simply have to go onto Google, and if you just go into Google itself and type Google Docs into the search bar, it will come up. And you'll be able to open documents and create documents yourself. And once you have done that, what you'll find is that you and anyone else can collaborate on a shared document or presentation in or outside of class with all changes tracked by the person who created the document.

So this was a really wonderful way that we can use in order to create this sort of shared space online that multiple people can contribute to and that can also be monitored by the instructor. And so that, right away, can help us see the way some of these logistical challenges can be resolved by Google Docs.

The second point here is that students can comment upon a revised student or instructor-created materials. So this gives us a really interesting way to be able to create communication between the instructor and the students and for the students to communicate with one another about course materials. And those course materials might be things that the instructor creates, might be readings online. They might be things that the students create.

So the basic step to get started is to simply to go onto Google and create your document. And you get to decide when you create that document who has access to it. So that's one of the things that you have to decide at the beginning is who do you want to be able to edit the document, who do you want to be able to see the document, and who you're going to share the document with.

You'll find that when you get onto the Google Doc screen, all this is very intuitive and that you'll be able to see. And you'll also find in the handouts that you'll come along with this 20 Minute Mentor instructions for how to do some of these more specific things.

So let's step back and talk about what are the sort of key features of Google Docs? First, multiple individuals in Google Docs can make changes to a document synchronously or asynchronously. This means it can happen in real time right in your classroom, or people are able to go back and make changes to a document outside of the classroom.

It means that you can be doing it as a group project in class, but you can also assign it as a homework assignment. Or you can even assign it as a presentation or a project for a high stakes assessment. So that's a really wonderful feature of Google Docs.

Second, the instructor can monitor changes in real time. So if students are out working in groups on a document, sitting in your classroom, you can be at the front of the room. And you can actually watch as they type things in or delete things into the document.

So this allows you to monitor which groups are really contributing to the document and which groups are maybe less active and gives you the opportunity to maybe step up to those groups and say, what are you working on? And you may find that those groups are thinking or talking. But it gives you the chance to be able to see exactly which groups are doing what.

And we all know one of the challenges too of collaborative learning is, you can't be everywhere at once in a collaborative learning classroom, right? And you have to kind of sort of go from group to group. Google Docs allows you a little bit more opportunity to kind of see what everyone is doing at once.

Third, the instructor can add comments for students to resolve. Now this is a really terrific feature. So oftentimes, when we give students feedback, maybe students are working on a task on a group project or collaborative learning environment. And you might walk up to them and say, well, you know, I want you to work on that or think a little bit about this. And then you have to go to the next group.

Well, what you can do in Google Docs is, type a comment into the side, you know, right next to a specific word or phrase or something that the students have done. And that comment can be left open until the students resolve it. So until they make a change, then they click the resolve button,

and you can see whether or not they have made the change that you were hoping they were going to make.

So comments can be made for them to resolve, or they can just be sort of comments on the document, say it's the final version. So this is an option that you have. But I really like that resolution feature because it allows you to be able to make students that generate automatic response from the students, to make sure that the students have to respond in some way.

Fourth, all changes and versions of a document can be tracked and recovered. Now there's a sort of setting which, automatic setting, so you won't see initially, all changes in versions when you're looking at your Google Doc. But you can go in and make sure that you can look at, there are ways to go and look and track and recover those. And you'll find those in the handout for more information about that.

So these are some of the key basic features of Google Docs that make is a really appropriate tool for using collaborative learning in your classroom. Let's talk a little bit about group tasks and about using group tasks in a classroom environment. And I think there are four key features here, which are oftentimes overlooked by instructors, but are really important for a successful group learning experience to happen.

The first is that the students have to have a task which concludes with a concrete product. It's typically not going to work very well for you to say to students, I want you to get in groups and discuss this concept. Well, that's a really hard thing for students to be able to do. What are they supposed to be talking about? What does a good discussion look like? These are things that really would have to be sort of modeled for them and taught and worked on in the class.

But if you give the students a concrete task, that gives them a learning objective. It gives them an objective in the same way that we have objectives for the course or the way that we have an objective for this 20 Minute Mentor. So you want to be able to have an objective that comes from the task and something concrete that they're going to show at the end.

Second, students need a clear understanding of their roles. What are they supposed to be doing here? Does the group itself have one sort of task that they're all going to complete together? Are individuals within the group going to be doing different things? Some instructors like to assign roles to students within a group so that one student might be the idea generator, one student is the scribe, another student is the questioner, another student is the skeptic, so you can do this in ways in which you assign different

roles to the students. But overall, you just want to make sure that the students understand what is their role in this particular task?

Third, instructors should monitor and provide feedback prior to task completion. So the old fashioned way of doing this is just walking amongst the groups, right? And being able to say you're on task here. You're doing well. The way to do this in Google Docs is to be able to do both. To monitor that document as it's being created and as you're watching the changes happen on the screen as well as being able to get up in response to something that you're seeing and be able to provide that feedback prior to the task completion.

So as in all learning activities, we want to make sure that students have the opportunities to try, fail, get feedback, and try again. And this is something that we should be able to do in our group tasks as well as in our assessments.

Fourth, make sure that the exercise concludes with some processing and discussion. Once students have their products, what are you going to do with them, right? Are you going to allow a few of them to be able to show their products to the class? Are you going to talk about several selected products? Are you going to ask every group to go through and present what they have done? That's a decision that you have to make.

But you want to make sure that something happens with whatever they've completed. Just like if you would put some time and energy into creating something, you would like to receive some feedback, some acknowledgement of it. And the same will be true of your students as well. Whether that processing or discussion happens in the classroom, or it may happen in terms of a product they turn into you, and then you give feedback on, make sure that there's some way that you acknowledge the work they have done and offer some kind of feedback.

Okay. So let's look at three specific examples of types of things that you can do on a group project with Google Docs. And the first is, you could offer a document to the students, one that you, either a course reading or one that you create and get students to comment on that document. And then you would be able to respond to those comments and questions.

The second would be you could add a document that the instructor and students collaborate on together. And I'll talk a little bit more about that. And the third one is a student collaborative document. The students work together on a project to ultimately create something that they will show to you and to each other at the end of the session.

Let's look at each of these in a little more detail. For an instructor document, the simple process would be an instructor would load a course reading into a Google Doc and something that you might be able to find online. You have to make sure that you're careful of copyright. Or the instructor creates a course document and loads that as to a Google Doc, which he or she shares with all the students.

Students would read that in advance of class. And then once the students get to class, the groups come together, and they have to make three comments along the text, or they have to raise three questions, or they have to make five comments, or they have to write an evaluation at the end of the document. Anything, it can be anything.

The goal here is to get students to provide active feedback on some document, some material that you have created and ensure that they are actively responding to the course material. And then this might finish by having the instructor review and resolve comments.

So, for example, an instructor, you can put a presentation into a Google Doc, so the presentation that you might normally do, say for a brief lecture in class, can be made into a Google Doc. And then the students could be assigned in groups to raise three key questions about the lecture that they would like to receive answers to or about things that were unclear to them.

And then the instructor takes that and can finish this process by answering some of those questions and engaging in a discussion with the students about why certain things were clear about what they would like to know more about. So what's really wonderful about this one as the other ones, is again it can sort of spark further conversation and further learning. So that will be our first example.

Our second example is that there can be an instructor, student document. So in this case, the instructor might create the framework or a skeleton for a presentation. So the instructor might say, for example, again let's think about an instructor who is using a presentation for a class to introduce some key concept or to help, oh, I don't know, for an instructor who wanted to introduce first content.

So instructor might create a framework of that presentation which has topics, for example, and say, you know, just sort of blank spaces left for three key points. The instructor could give that lecture or provide them with some type of other way of giving them that content and then ask the students to fill in that content. So the three key points about this particular topic, the students would have to fill that in.

The students might read course materials before class, or they might hear it in a lecture. But then the student groups are assigned to complete the presentation, right? And the instructor provides the frame. The students fill in the frame. So they might put in their own notes. They might actually be assigned to go find links to contemporary issues or world events or things that are happening in the world that could be used as interesting examples to illustrate the points in that particular presentation or lecture.

Or they might be assigned to find visuals. How can they find photographs? Or how can they find examples of clip art or other things that they might be able to use in order to help make the text come to life through visuals?

So this could be a really interesting way to get students thinking creatively about how to make connections between course content which might seem otherwise very dry and sort of livening it up a little bit with links or visuals or even audio or film clips. So this would be a way to kind of again get them engaged in partially creating the course content rather than sort of delivering it to them.

And the last step here again would be that the class views and discusses that final presentation together. And they might be doing some negotiating along the way. So for example, you might ask students to all work on the presentation together. And then after a 15-minute period in which they are sort of finding and putting in visuals, everyone goes back in and edits. And so everyone then is assigned the responsibility of editing one or two slides.

You might also do something like this by asking students to divide up so that group one handles the first three slides, group two handles the next three slides. And then everyone does the presentation together. And then there's a second phase in which students are assigned to go back and edit another group's slides.

The other thing about this, remember we talked about at the beginning about how sometimes groups are on different sort of rates of completion of tasks? When you're doing something like this, the great part is, when you see that a group has completed their slides and are just sitting there, you can then say to them, now I'd like you to go ahead and start editing some of the other slides that we have up here.

So it enables you very easily to sort of see not only what's happening but then to be able to assign further tasks for that group. Or a student that has completed their set of slides first, you immediately go in and create some comments for them to resolve while the other groups are still working on their first draft. So that's the way in which Google Docs can help facilitate that kind of resolution to this logistical problem.

The third suggestion here is to have the students create a document. The instructor assigns students a specific task, create a presentation for a local business, whatever it might be. In my creative nonfiction class, I gave the students a topic and said that we were going to write an article for the campus newspaper about this topic. And each group got assigned a specific section of the article.

So as you see, the groups are assigned different features or sections of that document. And then the groups sort of work on those together in class. And in the case of my creative writing students, they were actually literally working together to draft the document in class. And I was able to monitor what they were doing and give comments along the way. And occasionally, I would say, just sort of make a comment for them to think about, but sometimes I did give them comments that they had to resolve and make changes to their text.

And then the last thing was that we reviewed and edited that final document together. So again, this one you have to think a little bit more about helping students ensure that they have sort of a concrete task and that they know exactly what they're doing. Because in this one, you're not going to be creating the frame.

And when you're creating the frame, it's a little bit easier to make sure that they stay on task and know what they're doing. But when the student is creating the document entirely on their own, you have to probably do a little bit more monitoring. And again, I would suggest that you monitor both from the screen in the front of the room as well as going out and using the screen to help you recognize when you need to go out into the room and make specific comments along the way.

The last important point about this one is that this can be used for assignments outside of the classroom as well. So you might ask students who are going to produce a presentation, group presentations for, say, a final project for the semester, to do their presentation using Google Docs and make that document available to you so that you can go in and make comments and provide feedback to them as they're working on that final project prior to them getting graded on it.

So students can all use those Google Docs themselves, create their own documents, and give you access to it for that purpose. You might find also that you can encourage students to use Google Docs with each other so that they can be able to provide feedback on one another's papers if for a group assignment like that.

So Google Docs can be used for all kinds of reasons both in and outside of the classroom. But the really wonderful feature about it is that it helps people collaborate together in ways that allow them to see each other's work in real time as well as going back and being able to kind of track what they've done, notice their changes, respond to one another. It has all these wonderful features to it.

So final reminders for what you need to do as you're thinking about how to use Google Docs in your classroom. First, make sure that you are creating tasks with concrete products, and the Google Doc is that concrete product. So it lends itself really well to that. You want to have, remember, it can be not just a document. It can be documents. It can be presentations. It can be spreadsheets. There are a whole variety of things that actually can be created through Google Docs.

Second, make sure that you monitor what's going on in the group project, whether it's in or out of classroom, that you provide some comments to the students and that you ask them to resolve those comments. And that's a really great feedback loop that you can use in Google Docs.

Third, make sure that you review the final products together. And this is just something that we want to do anytime we're doing collaborative learning with our students. Ensure that students get some feedback on their work and that you class discuss it together to help everyone improve for the next time.

So this 20 Minute Mentor is something that we are interested in hearing your feedback on. So visit the link that you see on the screen there, and thank you very much.