

2021

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Recommended Citation

Yon, Annie (2021) "How Padlet Encouraged Student Collaboration and Engagement in My Virtual Classroom," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 10 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol10/iss2021/23>

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How Padlet Encouraged Student Collaboration and Engagement in My Virtual Classroom

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“Alright, so we just finished reading Chopin’s ‘The Story of an Hour,’ and the scene of Louise Mallard sitting in front of the open window and listening to the sound of birds stands out to me. What might the window symbolize? What themes are developed in this story?”

I surveyed the faces on twenty rectangular screens. Okay, I thought to myself, “wait time.” 1... 2... 3... 4... Students’ eyes darted, microphones stayed muted, chins brightened from concealed phones that lit up, and I could swear I heard birds chirping by my own window—their helpful attempt to break this awkward silence that ensued. I sighed.

“Max, please sit upright. Your camera has been facing the ceiling for two minutes.”

“Put your phones away. This is still class time.”

“Sam... Sam? Your screen went black. Are you still there?”

“Yes, finally! Thank you for raising your hand. What? I can’t hear you. You need to unmute yourself.”

Shoulders slumped and completely exhausted, I logged out of my last Zoom session for the day and numbly stared at the ceiling. *Ah, so this is how Max was feeling.* A mug of coffee in my hand, I concluded that no amount of caffeine could revitalize me, the once bubbly teacher who used to power-walk from one side of the chalkboard to the other filling it with abundant responses from enthusiastic students. In my brick-and-mortar classroom, I would grip the weighty chalk in my fingers, pass out the tangible handouts I meticulously created, see

the zealous hands shoot up whenever a question was asked, and analyze my students’ facial expressions and body language as validation of my teaching. After some reflection, I came to realize that it was difficult for my students to just sit passively in our virtual class (after coming from five other online courses) and listen to their teacher deliver a lengthy monologue to compensate for their lack of participation. In addition, my timid students felt intimidated socializing in our synchronous large group discussion of over twenty classmates. I wondered, *how do I alleviate or cease this problem of communication and encourage collaboration in my digital classroom?*

The Benefits of an Online Discussion Board

With the growth of virtual classes, it is crucial for teachers to integrate strategies that foster student engagement and build a sense of community in an online environment. One way to augment synchronous and asynchronous communication is to implement an online discussion board, which can provide rich opportunities for students to share opinions, ask clarifying questions, collaborate, and have their voices heard. An “online discussion” can refer to messages left on electronic bulletin boards, a virtual space for ideas to be gathered, shared, and revised. A discussion board can encourage conversations among a classroom community rather than just one between a teacher and student. In “The Context and Content of Online Discussions: Making

Cyber-Discussions Viable for the Secondary School Curriculum,” Dave S. Knowlton and Heather M. Knowlton emphasize the merits of online discussions: “Online discussions can broaden the way students connect with each other... Learning is itself a social process and through discussion, students can gain a broader perspective of course material” (40). In other words, collaborative note-taking and hearing diverse perspectives can deepen student understanding of class materials and concepts. Onyema et al. echo this point when they posit, “[With] their thoughts and opinions validated, [students are] more willing to share out loud in class afterwards... [and] learners feel the supportive presences of participating peers, mentors and experts. [This] stimulates learning satisfaction that will further encourage students to think independently and reflect on what is said during online discussions” (4853). By incorporating an interactive discussion board, such as Padlet, as part of class resources, teachers can facilitate discourse among students, create a motivational environment, improve students’ digital literacy skills, and overall, cultivate productive learning experiences in a virtual setting.

Padlet: An Introduction

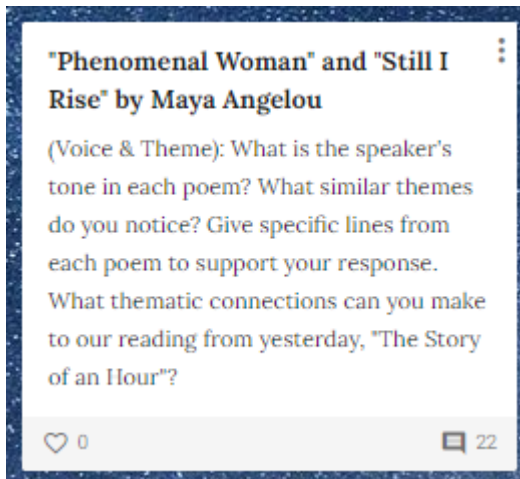
Padlet is an online bulletin board that allows both the teacher and students to write and share ideas by posting virtual sticky notes, which can include writing, drawings, images, GIFs, videos, audio, and links. Using a unique teacher-created Padlet link (the teacher can create a public or private Padlet wall for each class or period they teach using one account), students can post ideas anonymously or with their names just by clicking on a “+” button in the lower right corner. On Padlet, teachers can post do-now questions or exit slips that students can directly comment on, or students can ask questions or post insights they have during

reading; members in a group can collaborate, simultaneously working on one post (e.g. one group might create a post on symbols seen in the story while another might explore themes); they can read diverse perspectives on a topic and learn from each other; and students can create multimodal posts combining two or more modes such as written language, visuals, and audio recordings. Furthermore, students can participate in collaborative notetaking and interactive storytelling as well as use their Padlet post as their digital poster board for a project or assignment. In conclusion, it is a transformative technological tool that enhances student engagement and collaboration in an interactive space where ideas are collated and easily accessible.

How I Incorporated Padlet in My Narrative Unit

I first introduced Padlet to my students during our narrative writing unit in the second week of class. I explained, “For the first fifteen minutes of class time, we will be connecting poetry to the prose we are reading, writing down our responses to the literature in the ‘chat section’ of Padlet, then sharing our ideas in Zoom breakout rooms.” That week, my students had studied narrative elements—plot, character, setting, and theme—after reading Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” and Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour.” In order for students to further explore voice and theme developed in Chopin’s story, I linked two poems by Maya Angelou, “Phenomenal Woman” and “Still I Rise,” onto my Padlet post. I asked them to respond to the following questions: *What is the speaker’s tone in each poem? What similar themes do you notice? What connections can you make to our reading from “The Story of an Hour”?* First, I modeled the type of responses I anticipated and then gave students time to write on Padlet. Comments

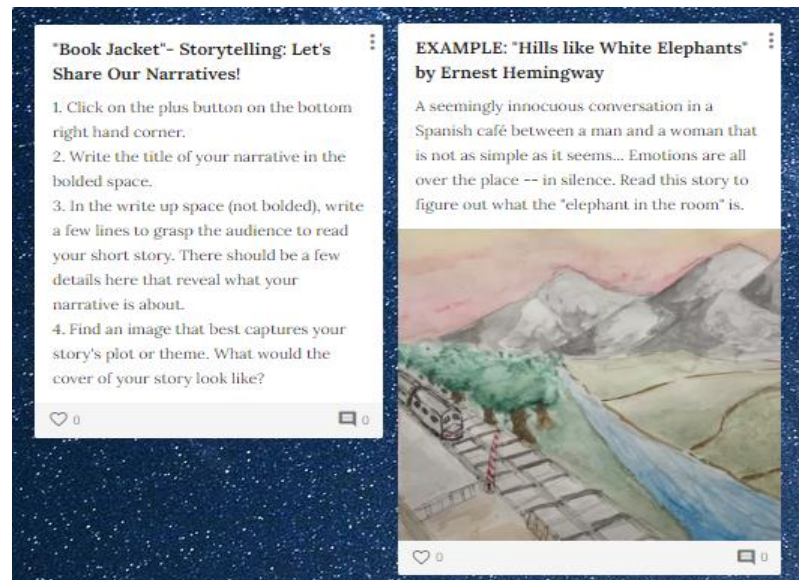
started piling on the post; students commented on how the speakers in Angelou's poems are "self-assured," expanded upon the "theme of women empowerment and overcoming oppression," and made connections among the three texts. With their responses "published" on Padlet, I asked them to take the next five minutes to read their peers' posts before they jumped into breakout rooms of four to further discuss their interpretations.



In our large group meeting prior to using Padlet, students remained quiet with only a few sharing their ideas; in these breakout rooms, however, they were much more animated. For example, Liz shared, "My Padlet post was about how Louise in 'The Story of an Hour' wants freedom and independence from what is seemingly an oppressive marriage. In 'Phenomenal Woman,' the speaker also wants to escape societal expectations of how women should behave or look like." Sam added, "I agree. I chose the quote, 'I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size...Phenomenal woman, that's me.' The speaker defies society's standards of 'perfect' but is still 'phenomenal.'" Addie contributed, "She's confident and sassy. I like her," and the group members chuckled. In another breakout room, Aaron read his post to the group and explained how he focused on the

historical context of when Angelou's poems and Chopin's short story were written. His peer responded, "That makes sense. I wrote about Mrs. Mallard's desire to be liberated and not live for her husband in late nineteenth-century patriarchal society. It relates to Angelou's speakers' bold defiance against oppression and discrimination." Having direct access to classmates' and their own ideas on Padlet facilitated discussion and interactive learning. In short, collaborative learning promoted deeper reading comprehension and confidence as students' interpretations of the texts were either validated or revised.

After analyzing literary elements in short stories and poems, my juniors wrote their own four-to-five-page narratives. To give my students an audience to share their writing with, I asked them to create a "book jacket" to "sell" their stories on Padlet. First, students created their own post with the title of their narrative essay, an image as the cover of their story, and captivating lines to hook readers. Next, students took ten minutes to read their classmates' posts and



respond to them. For instance, Ava, who appreciates historical fiction, titled her post "Escaping Convention" and wrote:

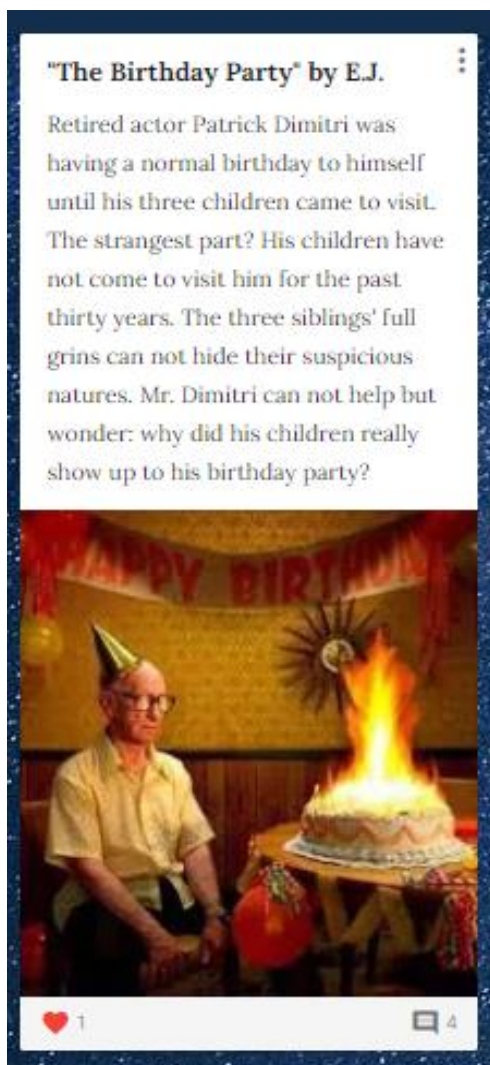
Charlotte, now a grandmother, narrates her story of what she believed to be her new beginning. Back in 1979, she was just a teenage girl looking to become an independent woman but was tied down by tradition. Eventually, she comes to a point where she must choose what she will become and whether her fate is decided by patriarchy and societal norms.

One of her peers clicked on the heart icon to like her post and commented, “I really like how your story addresses societal norms that women had to follow and how tradition can affect someone’s aspirations.” Another classmate responded to Ava, “Cool! I like how ‘Escaping Convention’ focuses



on the woman wanting to escape her old, abusive life to pursue a better one.”

In another example, Eli, who enjoys suspenseful thrillers, titled his piece “The Birthday Party” and explained:



Retired actor, Patrick Dimitri, was having a normal birthday by himself until his three children came to visit. The strangest part? His children have not come to visit him for the past thirty years. The three siblings’ full grins cannot hide their suspicious nature. Mr. Dimitri cannot help but wonder: *why did his children really show up to his birthday party?*

Classmates commented, “The plot intrigues me. I wonder why his children came to the party. Were the three people not really his kids? It makes you think about the possibilities.” Seeing which story genres and

posts students enjoyed and responded to, I strategically placed them into breakout rooms. In these groups of four, students reiterated the title of their narrative, discussed why they chose the image they did, then read a short excerpt of the most captivating lines from their stories. I joined my students' rooms and saw smiles, questions asked, and compliments, as well as constructive criticism, exchanged. Ultimately, providing a means for students to share their writing on Padlet encouraged interactive storytelling and overall, higher engagement.

How Padlet Enhanced Student Experience in the Virtual Classroom

In the first few weeks of remote teaching, I dreaded the “wait time”—the agonizing fifteen seconds in which my students and I had a competitive stare-down after I asked a question, then I dejectedly groaned, “That wasn’t rhetorical by the way.” In addition, I was a reluctant online teacher who naively thought that technology hindered genuine conversation, and that only traditional in-person classes could stimulate the advantages of a face-to-face discussion. Just as the use of Padlet did alleviate some of the challenges of discussing literature via Zoom, it also made me rethink what counts as “genuine conversation”—that oral conversations are not the only means of effective communication. For instance, after reading, commenting, and sharing written insights on Padlet posts, students were much more confident in discussing their interpretations of Angelou’s poems and excerpts from their narrative essay. Moreover, writing down ideas in a public forum meant that it was “permanent” and “published,” so students thought more deeply about the content and how to articulate their thoughts into words. Reading diverse analyses also gave students a fresh perspective on the topic, which led some to

evaluate and revise their own original thoughts. Ultimately, teaching virtually this year enlightened me to see the benefits of experimenting with online technologies that I was initially skeptical of. My takeaway from this experience was that by blending traditional and digital learning, both teachers and students can develop different forms of communication skills and augment ongoing learning—including multimodal, digital, and collaborative learning—that transcends the physical boundaries of the classroom. After all, as teachers, it is our responsibility to nurture student engagement, critical thinking, and discourse, but to also successfully adapt our classrooms and teaching strategies to the changing nature of education in the digital age.

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