

GoogleDocs and Zoom: A Love Story

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I got this, I thought. *Easy*.

You see, when the pandemic first struck early last spring and triggered a nationwide quarantine, I adjusted to my university's mid-semester switch to online teaching with a weird mix of brashness and aplomb. After all, wasn't I *already* an experienced online instructor? In fact, since I mostly taught accelerated online courses, that "mid-semester" switch last spring coincided, luckily for me, with the *end* of one module and the beginning of another. So not only did my own preferred teaching modality stay the same, but my *students*—experienced online savants all—never once had to contend with an unexpected disruption to their normal learning.

Needless to say, out of respect for my increasingly frazzled colleagues, I never mentioned this out loud to anyone. All other factors being equal, though, my dominant emotional response to the pandemic, at least in pedagogical terms, was approximately: "Pfft."

Alas, unlike George Minafer in Orson Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), I never quite received my "comeuppance" for this bit of hubris. Still, the pandemic's real challenge for me came that fall when I—feeling somewhat guilty over my serene spring — volunteered to teach several "Live Online" courses that my department desperately needed to fill. Previously, my online teaching had all been wonderfully—beautifully—*marvelously* asynchronous but our incoming freshmen, as student surveys soon revealed, craved greater personal interactions with their classmates and teachers than they had received just six months prior. So, in our English Department's Writing Program, this meant adjusting our pre-designed accelerated online courses into 16-week Live Online courses. The theory was that it would be easier for instructors new to online modalities to convert tried-and-true asynchronous activities into synchronous

ones. Personally, I found this to be largely true. It *did*, however, necessitate some rather creative adaptations of the various tech tools at my disposal.

For instance, I ended up stumbling upon a usefully symbiotic relationship between Zoom and GoogleDocs. Fortunately, thanks to my prior online teaching, I already had several good asynchronous technologies up my sleeve: automatically graded quizzes, Panopto, VoiceThread, etc. Unfortunately, my long-ago experiences teaching face-to-face were—let me put this mildly—almost regressively low tech. (Yes, I was one of those.) Thus, the new Live Online modality was more than a little daunting. I had to scramble for ways to convince my freshmen that, yes, they *were* getting a real college experience ... and that is how I came to marry GoogleDocs with Zoom.

My breakthrough came during our first major project in ENGL 101. For this assignment, a Genre Literary Narrative, students had to tell a personal story about how they came to learn a particular genre of writing—a great practice in raising genre consciousness. For the most part, they picked familiar genres like letters, product reviews, research essays, and blog posts, but their Genre Literacy Narratives also had to be interesting, too. By “interesting,” of course, I only mean that my students had to practice the tools-of-the-trade normally practiced by most creative non-fiction writers: dialogue, descriptive detail, narrative tension, a climax, etc.

Typically, my past students seemed to flounder most when it came to writing believable, natural-seeming dialogue. Somehow, it all tended to sound like bad *Gone with the Wind* fanfic, except with more adjectives and less syntactical correctness. (“My dearest Rhett” she exclaimed, Passionately!!) And so on. All the cardinal sins were there: groan-inducing dialogue tags, repetitive sentence structures, unnecessary melodrama. ... Anyway. I was stuck in this Live Online modality, and I wondered if I might not find a more effective way to teach dialogue than my asynchronous courses had ever managed. Then a lightbulb flashed. Dialogue skits!

In prior online courses, you see, I felt that I’d been dipping just slightly too often into the “peer review” well. That is, students would compose dialogue for their Genre Literacy Narratives, then other students would offer feedback. Of course, research has repeatedly demonstrated the effectiveness of peer review, which is why our pre-designed writing courses employ it so frequently, but the activity does get monotonous after a while. Plus, I wanted to offer my Live Online classes something more group-centered. The problem is, how could my students practice

writing dialogue in the *one* 50-minute session that, in order to mitigate Zoom fatigue, we were allowed to have with our students per week?

Turns out dialogue skits are the perfect solution, and all they need are GoogleDocs and Zoom.

The activity works like this. First, I explained how the skits would fit into the Genre Literacy Narrative and the overall course—my normal contextualization. Then I reminded students about what good dialogue normally requires, linking them to an online resource called “19 Ways to Write Better Dialogue.” Next, I split everyone into Zoom breakout rooms. Four to five students per room, I felt, seemed about right.

“All right!” I said. “So, ladies and gentlemen, here’s what we’ll do. Every group will compose a short skit that uses dialogue. The skit can be about anything you like. If you want to be creative, be creative! The only requirement is that you have at least two characters, and that your dialogue between those characters must be revised according to three ‘rules’ from the online resource I just provided.”

I then dropped a new link into Zoom’s chat.

“When you compose these skits, write them into this collaborative GoogleDocs document. Afterwards, we’ll discuss the effectiveness of each skit as a class.”

Normally, the problem with Zoom breakout rooms is that, unlike face-to-face settings, you (the instructor) can’t easily see what anyone is doing. It’s hard to gauge everyone’s progress. So, what GoogleDocs did was allow me real-time access to what my students were writing. It also functioned like an overhead projector, letting everyone in the class quickly see their colleagues’ work, for easier group discussion. The parameters of my GoogleDocs document (prepared the previous night) looked like this: each group had their own section, and once I determined which students belonged to which group, I typed in their names during the early stages of the breakout rooms, so they’d quickly recognize their designated section once they were ready to start writing. And that was it—a highly bare bones, but effective, collaborative document. All told, the skits for all three groups, each single-spaced, took less than two pages of total document space.

Anyway, when the skits were finally finished, I started the “group discussion” portion of the activity, asking each group about the three “rules” they used for writing better dialogue.

Other groups would then comment on the strengths and weaknesses of each skit, which they usually did according to the dialogue rules they themselves had chosen. In other words, my marriage between Zoom and GoogleDocs was a kind of modified peer review—it combined composition, self-revision (the “19 Ways to Write Better Dialogue” resource), and peer feedback into one 50-minute session. Discussion ended up being quite lively, and we had one of our most productive sessions of the semester.

When next I teach face-to-face in the classroom, Zoom won’t be necessary. Still, I’ll definitely be taking advantage of GoogleDocs again. My only change would involve the follow-up to the skits. In the next class meeting, I’d want students *immediately* to start applying the skills practiced in their skits to their own scenes of dialogue for the Genre Literacy Narrative, which they would have drafted beforehand. For the life of me, though, I can now barely remember why my old in-person courses hadn’t used technologies like GoogleDocs more enthusiastically.