

Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

## Using Padlet to Engage International Pathway Students in Academic Research

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This is a reflective account of using Padlet with first-year international students enrolled in a pathway program at a large Mid-Atlantic university. To qualify for the pathway program, students must have International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores within a certain range and must meet all other university admission requirements. From 2012-2015, I designed and instructed two courses, American Cultures and Research Methods, that were intended to develop pathway students' information literacy skills, critical thinking skills, and ethical reasoning abilities, as well as their oral and written communication skills. The course products for the American Cultures course included a group multimedia presentation, with an annotated bibliography and two individual reflective essays. In Research Methods, each student produced an annotated bibliography, gave an oral presentation, and wrote an 1800 word academic argument.

By the spring of 2014, it was clear that my students were able to complete the course assignments, but they demonstrated a level of understanding and application that was much lower than what they would need to achieve academic success beyond the pathway program. I made changes to the curricula, such as providing students with a list of reliable resources for

their research (books, trade journals, Internet sites and databases) and applying Bizup's (2008) BEAM model (background, exhibits, arguments, methods) to guide their use of sources in developing their ideas and academic arguments. I also included peer feedback activities on drafts of their annotated bibliographies, but all of this proved to be ineffective. Most students did not see the value in these activities, often coming to class without their best draft in hand. They struggled to accurately summarize and appropriately use sources.

Frustrated with my students' progress, I met with a colleague who recommended [Padlet](#), a free online platform that works like a digital message board, where web links, short video/audio files, and various document formats can be summarized/explained and shared. Anyone can open a Padlet account and create a "wall" using a wide variety of templates and backgrounds provided. Document formats such as MS Word, PDFs, PowerPoint, and Excel can be linked or uploaded easily to a Padlet wall. One significant benefit is that sharing information on a wall does not require everyone to have a Padlet account. It is as simple as sharing the URL. For sensitive information, the creator of a Padlet wall can include a password. A brief overview of how to use Padlet in education is provided on the [TeachersFirst](#) website.

In the fall of 2014, I revised both courses to include student use of Padlet. I did so by replacing the written annotated bibliographies with two "research-to-date" presentations that students were required to give using Padlet. I scheduled these presentations in advance so that students knew when they had to present and when they were required to give peer feedback. To ensure consistency in the feedback students gave and received, I created forms that focused on the reliability and variety of sources as well as their intended use (i.e. Background, Exhibits, Analysis, Methods). For each of these in-class oral presentations, students showed their online Padlet wall using the classroom projector to provide the audience with short summaries of their

sources to explain how they intended to use these sources and to state next steps in their research process. If necessary, they opened a source or link from their Padlet wall in order to answer questions.

There were several benefits to having students use Padlet as part of their research. First, they were no longer producing work for my eyes alone. As Spordark (2005) found, the quality of student work tends to improve when technology is used to reach a larger audience. My students were now engaging with a larger audience of peers in a more authentic task that required the use of technology and oral communication skills. They were able to compare the quality of their own work to that of their peers, identifying gaps in their research and ways to close them (see Sadler, 1989). The research-to-date presentations using Padlet also served as a time management tool. Students could no longer wait until the end of term to start work on their projects. Nevertheless, there were still a number of students who had likely prepared their Padlet wall at the last minute. Some even admitted to this during their presentations. However, based on purely anecdotal evidence, I found the quality of student work improved across both courses in the 2014-2015 academic year.

Student feedback from the end of course evaluation forms indicated that most found Padlet to be a useful tool for organizing and summarizing their sources. They also noted that while they were nervous giving the short research-to-date presentations, they became more confident over time and enjoyed comparing their own work to that of their peers.

One caveat is that Padlet does not have a lockdown feature (i.e. students can continue to edit what is on their Padlet wall even after an assessment due date). For this reason, I did not use Padlet *as* the assessment. Instead, I used it as the vehicle for students to collect, summarize, and synthesize their sources. I stated on both syllabi that students had to include the link or document

for each source they referenced in a graded assessment on their Padlet wall. This eliminated the time I spent locating and verifying their use of sources, allowing me to focus my efforts on evaluating the quality of their work.

This is one account of using Padlet with undergraduate students; however, I see my situation as neither unique nor isolated. Current trends in higher education include increasing international student enrollment and widening participation to non-traditional students. The expectation that students will arrive to our classrooms with similar educational backgrounds, academic skills, and experiences will no longer suffice because, well, it simply isn't true. It is now incumbent upon university instructors to develop these skills using assessments that represent real-world applications. The use of back channel technologies, such as Padlet, provide innovative ways of teaching and learning, particularly for engaging students with tasks that are intended to develop a wide range of academic and professional skills.

## References

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