TEACHING AND LEARNING

Feedback from the Black Box: Using Google Docs for Engagement in Remote Business Information Literacy Instruction

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As an instructor who normally teaches in-person information literacy sessions, I heavily rely on non-verbal feedback from students during instruction to ensure that my pace is appropriate, they understand the information I am presenting, and they are following along. Such feedback is generally absent during Zoom instruction, when nearly all students turn off their cameras; 25 black boxes will not provide a nod, an engaged stare, or a confused glance. Attempting to catch feedback in the chat area is also challenging during a screenshare, and students are loath to use their microphones.

I counteracted these numerous areas of silence by deploying one basic tool, Google Docs, that helped me gather formative feedback and assessment. It could also be used as a resource for students after the instruction session concluded. I initially used Google Docs to create a remote synchronous-friendly version of my typical handout that included the lesson objectives, names and descriptions of key resources, and exercises to help students organize their topics and develop search strategies. I intended for students to copy the content into their own document to work on independently during the lesson. I could tell from the tool that students were accessing my handout document, but I had no way of knowing if they were doing the exercises correctly, if at all, in their own documents.

After one silent session, I had students work directly in my Google Docs document. I posed questions in the document for students to answer there: What is a public company? What information is in a 10K? They also annotated the list of resources we would cover in the class with the information they would find in each and suggested keywords for sample searches.

Instead of staring at black boxes and waiting for someone to use their microphone, students populate the Google Docs document with responses. If the sharing link is set to "anyone can edit" in Google Docs, students not signed into an account will appear as anonymous animal names instead of their own names, e.g., "Anonymous Zebra." This allows pressure-free participation. At the end of each session, I set the document to view only and share it with the class instructor for distribution as the students' self-created research assignment resource guide.

I found this method to be reliable in keeping students engaged, even if they are unable to use video or audio for various reasons. The Google Doc can replace Zoom chat, which can be hard to use during demonstrations. Zoom chat is also not reflected in a recording of the session unless you remember to read each comment or question aloud, but the text on-screen in Google Docs will capture the chat. Later, the Doc itself is easily shared with those who use a screen reader or other accessibility tools.

Asking students to think and share without having their face or voice recorded is a game changer in my sessions. I went from speaking entirely to myself in sessions because students would not turn on

their cameras nor use their microphones, to sessions where a majority of students are engaged through the Doc. I can use a new engagement method by reading what the students contribute, praising their work, and anonymously correcting errors in a constructive way. It also allows me to set expectations for participation at the start of class and assure students that it will not be a lecture they can tune out. This approach has been praised by the course instructors and a peer instructional reviewer from my institution. While I hope to go back to teaching in person when it is safe, this is something I will keep in my teaching toolbox, as allowing for anonymous participation can level the playing field for many students and get them involved in the lesson.