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“Seeing other examples has helped a bit”: using Padlet in academic English classes in the arts university

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Abstract

This article outlines and reflects on a series of writing activities from Language Development sessions with undergraduate art and design students using Padlet, an interactive notice board application, considering how Padlet offers new and different modes of communication and tutor feedback. The move to online teaching was imposed by the pandemic and lockdowns, and was challenging for language tutors who aim to embed language teaching and learning practice for students within the daily life of the art and design courses. However, the online classes revealed new opportunities for dialogue and collaboration.

Keywords

language; pedagogy; English for academic purposes; digital learning; Padlet

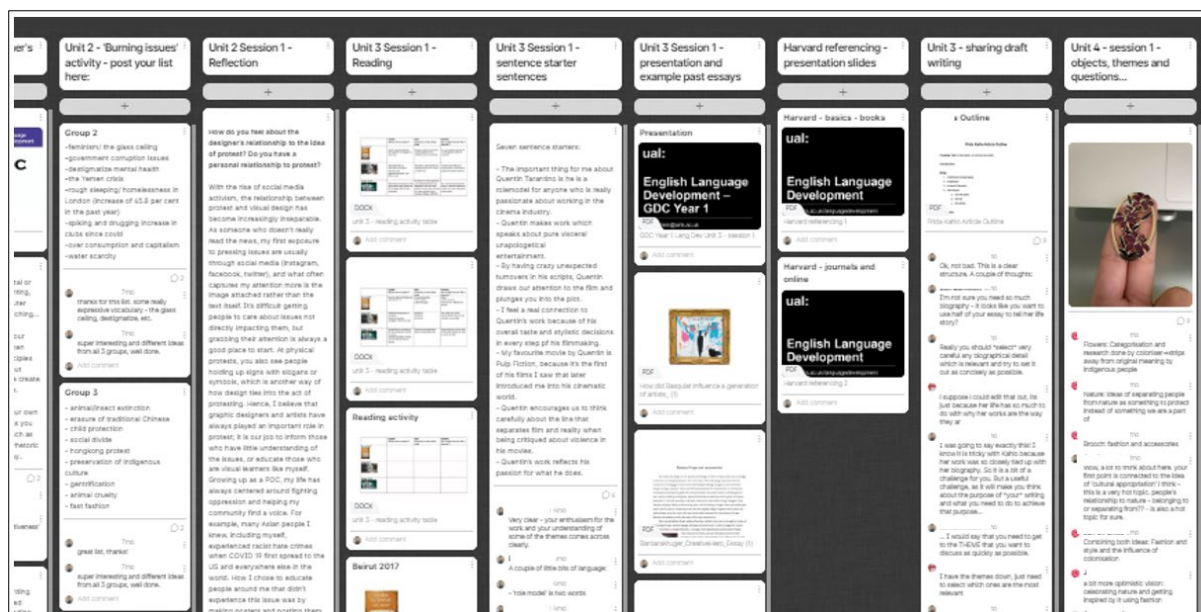


Figure 1: Example of Padlet in use

Introduction

Language tutors at art and design universities seek to develop creative and engaging ways of working which relate directly to the creative disciplines (Thomas *et al*, 2019). Moving classes online during the pandemic posed extra challenges. The option of visiting studios to connect with staff and students became difficult, often impossible. However, the online classroom itself offered new, creative and effective ways of teaching and learning. This article outlines and reflects on a series of writing activities from Language Development sessions with undergraduate art and design students using Padlet, an interactive notice board application.

Language teaching and learning in an academic context

A view of "learning as increasing participation in communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, pp.50-51) must also account for the fact that some students will need more help than others to understand and interpret the rules for successful participation. The academy is sometimes viewed as a homogenous entity in regard to 'academic English', but in fact there is no single undisputed standard for successful communication. Indeed, "conflicting advice received from academic teaching staff in different courses [can add] to the confusion." (Lea and Street, 1998, p.164). A student's apparent failure to match explicit or implicit standards in writing, for example, may not simply be about the student lacking a necessary skill, but might be viewed as a breakdown in the negotiation of meaning between reader and writer. Teachers and students need "to imagine new possibilities for meaning making in academic writing" (Lillis, 2003, p.196).

In practical terms, recognising this plurality of understandings suggests dialogue as the basis of teaching and learning, rather than an authoritative monologue (Lillis, 2003, p.198). "Language tutors *conference* with individual students to help the latter with their writing and this usually involves a lot of negotiation of meaning between both parties." (Jaidev and Chan, 2018, p.207).

Wingate and Tribble (2012) argue that students need help to learn the discourses of the subjects they are studying. "[L]earning to write in an academic discipline is not a purely linguistic matter that can be fixed outside the discipline, but involves an understanding of how knowledge in the discipline is presented, debated and constructed." (Wingate and Tribble, 2012, p.481)

Art schools, with their focus on creativity and imagination, are (one would certainly hope) an ideal site for imagining new possibilities. Within art and design education, language teachers seek to engage with the art and design subject matter, to embed the language work into the life of the course and vice versa (Thomas *et al*, 2019).

Padlet

Having committed to language teaching which foregrounds dialogue and embeds the language work into the course, how do we move the class online? This question was central during the months of pandemic and lockdown, but will apply in future too: online teaching and learning are likely to remain an option for the foreseeable future, and might indeed offer possibilities that face-to-face does not. As Davenport argues, "[O]nline learning can provide a more varied and flexible approach to learning, and digital tools such as Padlet or OneNote can encourage more interaction and collaboration." (Davenport, 2022, p.130).

Padlet is a web-based notice board where participants can post Word documents, images, videos, and other kinds of files, and can comment on each other's posts. It can be accessed during or outside of class time and offers the option of anonymity for students who are anxious about sharing their writing publicly. Its "user friendly, intuitive features [allow] room for creativity and personalisation." (Rashid, Yunus and Wahi, 2019, p.618) and it has been shown to increase student engagement, especially in collaborative tasks (Garnham & Betts, 2018). Padlet therefore seems very well-suited to an art college context where the creative, the personal, and the collaborative are highly-valued.

Using Padlet in the online Language Development class at UAL

Language Development classes at UAL are generally designed to support students with English as an additional language. Classes specific to particular courses are planned with input from course teams and/or in response to course materials and unit briefs. The examples below are from sessions with a group of undergraduate students. The four writing activities happened towards the middle or end of different Language Development sessions, following on from readings, discussions, vocabulary tasks, etc.

Example 1:

Students chose an image from a selection and I provided prompts to help start a discussion of meaning and representation in their chosen image. After the discussion I asked them to write a few sentences as a group and share on the class Padlet wall.

One group responded to a black and white photograph of Maya Angelou, lying on the floor in pensive mood, pen and pad in hand. Their response was:

- "A sense that she is writing poetry, inspired by magazines/cards."
- "Maybe the fact that she is looking out toward the source of light means she is looking out the window trying to draw inspiration for her writing."
- "Her position and gaze suggest she is relaxed yet attentive."
- "Print of shirt feels very 60's."
- "Juxtaposition of her being on the floor in contrast with the formality of the shirt and work she is doing."
- "Her stature makes her appear powerful."
- "She seems to be ahead of her time representing women's power in more challenging times with her confident and professional demeanour."

My typed comment underneath was:

"Thanks for this. Lots of strong interpretation here. I think you have identified something really interesting in your last sentence. A representation of a powerful woman (and especially a powerful black woman) might have been quite uncommon at the time that this picture was published."

This tells the students that they are on the right track, that this writing makes sense within the discourse of their discipline and alerts other students in the class to it as well.

Another group responded to a still image from a Nintendo computer game. Their submission was:

- "Classical game."
- "Kids nowadays grow up on these kinds of things."
- "They/we know about visual culture before we know about languages."
- "Old games lasting into the present."
- "In this image, the stars mean that you got the reward. The plant symbolises danger and you need to avoid it to get the gold coin."

My written comment underneath elicited short responses from group members:

Teacher: *"Thanks for this. You have the beginnings of an analysis in your last sentence. I wonder *why* gold coins symbolise reward and plants symbolise danger."*

Student 1: *"A goal - to prevail against the dangers of the plants, that the risk is worth the reward."*

Student 2: *"it's rules of the game, I also don't know why. But in my experience, plant is red with sharp teeth, normally, plant not like this. And gold coins represent money."*

Undergraduate students often struggle with expressing criticality, and this comment encouraged the group to go a little deeper in their analysis.

Example 2:

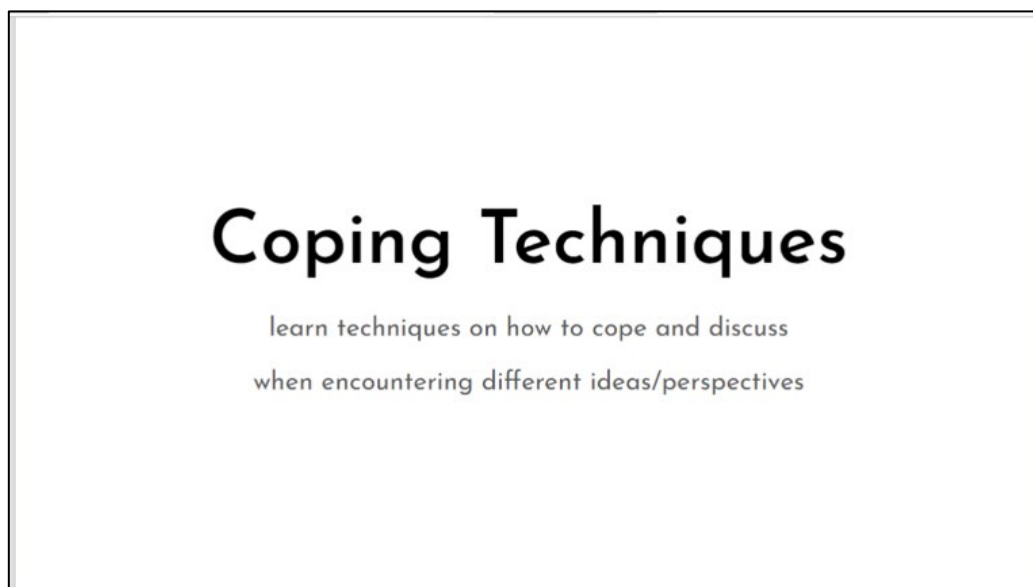
During a session exploring identity and culture, students worked in groups to draw up a set of guidelines for staff and students for how to interact successfully with others from different cultural backgrounds. Here are the extracts from one group's post:

Focus Months

dive into focusing on celebrating different cultures and their history: eg black history month, as well as other cultures (asian/islam/jewish/LGBTQIA+)

Social Media

keep up to date on relevant worldwide news



This has been thought through visually as well as in terms of linguistic content. The group clearly enjoyed the opportunity to engage their aesthetic design sensibility, but not to the detriment of the language and the ideas, which themselves are creative and interesting responses to the task.

Example 3:

We explored the meanings of *thinking approaches*, *making methods*, and *creative attributes*, these three categories being key elements in the current course brief. Following warm up and discussion activities, students shared examples for each of the three categories on Padlet. I commented under each post:

“One making method is: Collage
One thinking approach is: Research on artists and designers
One creative attribute is: Critical observation”

Teacher: “*Thanks :)*”

Teacher: “*I wonder if 'critical observation' would be a research method or thinking approach? *Being observant* could definitely be a creative attribute...*”

“Thinking Approach: Inclusive (?)
Making Method: Digital
Creative Attributes: quick learner, fast thinker”

Teacher: “*Thanks :)*”

Teacher: “*I wonder... when we say quick thinking we often imagine someone flexible, imaginative, energetic, perhaps solution-focussed? All of these might be creative attributes?*”

“One making method is:

- lino cut
- digital illustration
- film

One thinking approach is:

- antiracism

- climate crisis
- lgbtq+ community

One creative attribute is:

- ambiguity?"

Teacher: *"not sure 'ambiguity' is a creative attribute... in language teaching/learning we have a phrase 'tolerance of ambiguity, which means when someone is comfortable with ambiguous ideas or situations. Maybe that could be a creative attribute?"*

Teacher: *"I like your other suggestions a lot :)"*

Student: *"Alright cool! Yeah, the creative attribute bit confused me a little, but seeing other examples has helped a bit. thank u :)"*

In this case my comments contribute to enriching the students' vocabulary by introducing alternative words and phrases. These words and phrases simultaneously provide further clues to understanding the three key phrases from the brief themselves. Comments are phrased as questions rather than instructions.

Example 4:

I asked students to share plans and/or drafts for essays. The current unit brief was to write about a historical figure and draw out themes connected to their work. This student produced a very early stage outline without too much detail, but it did stimulate a short-written dialogue between us in the comments underneath:

"Introduction:

Body:

1. Childhood & Upbringing
2. Adulthood
3. Artwork Elements
4. Her Impact
 - a. On the world
 - b. On me
 - c. On others"

Conclusion:

Teacher: *"Ok, not bad. This is a clear structure. A couple of thoughts:"*

Teacher: *"I'm not sure you need so much biography - it looks like you want to use half of your essay to tell her life story?"*

Teacher: *"Really you should *select* very careful any biographical detail which is relevant and try to set it out as concisely as possible."*

Student: *"I suppose I could edit that out, it's just because her life has so much to do with why her works are the way they are."*

Teacher: *"I was going to say exactly this! I know it is tricky with [person] because her work was so closely tied up with her biography. So it is a bit of a challenge for you. But a useful challenge, as it will make you think about the purpose of *your* writing and what you need to do to achieve that purpose..."*

Teacher: "...I would say that you need to get to the *THEME* that you want to discuss as quickly as possible."

Student: "I have the themes down, just need to select which ones are the most relevant"

This conversation is very much about negotiating the often implicit conventions around writing in the discipline.

Reflections

The activity in Example 1 affords the tutor the chance to signpost aspects of discourse, showing students where they have been successful or unsuccessful in constructing and presenting their ideas in a way that is understood in the context of the discipline and the institution, as per Wingate and Tribble (2012, p.481). The second activity (Example 2) allows students to express their creativity and create a visual style, and implicitly acknowledges that the language cannot be meaningfully separated from the creative milieu in which it is being used. Perhaps this points towards an art and design-centred version of Lillis' "new possibilities for meaning making" (2003, p.196) – a combination of the linguistic and the visual which could be very powerful for these students.

In the next activity (Example 3), the phrasing of tutor comments as questions can be a first step in creating a dialogue as suggested by Lillis (2003, p.198). Also notable in this example is the student comment that "seeing other examples has helped a bit" – a testament to the ease of sharing and viewing contributions on this platform. The activity in example 4 is extremely context-specific, as it is based on the essay brief, and therefore can address the requirements not only of the discipline but of the course and its tutors and markers, as opposed to an intangible notion of 'academic English'. Also seen in this example is the beginning of a dialogue or "conference" (Jaidev and Chan, 2018, p.207) between teacher and student.

Overall, Padlet offers a range of activities and interactions. The ease of sharing and the visibility of the contributions is a major strength. Being able to access each other's contributions and the teacher's feedback quickly and easily can provide students with a richness of stimulus and inspiration.

The feedback and dialogue process on Padlet is not quite the same as in any other context. The interaction itself can be close to real-time but also offers student and teacher an option of thinking time which they would not necessarily have in conversation. Therefore, Padlet offers something of both the immediacy of conversation and the thoroughness of written feedback. Additionally, Padlet affords the teacher the opportunity to respond individually to students but publicly, so that all students can benefit from the feedback given to their peers. Of course, this cannot replicate a face-to-face conversation, which provides a multitude of cues such as eye contact and body language, and unmatched potential for pace and subtlety in turn-taking. That said, information in face-to-face conversation can sometimes be lost in the noise.

The fact that the Padlet board remains accessible outside class time is greatly beneficial. It is almost unheard of for a language class at the university to have a permanent space where classwork can be displayed. Deni and Zainal's finding that students return to Padlet walls "1) to view other students' work; 2) to view teacher's comments; 3) to get feedback; and 4) for revision/ as reference" (2018, p.160) is borne out by conversations I have had with students and staff members. A 'chat' facility such as that in Blackboard Collaborate offers some of the same functionality of Padlet but a permanent record of conversation and feedback is not so easily created or easily accessible.

Conclusion

Padlet at its best brings a feeling of energy to an online class. Watching as contributions and comments pop up on the screen in real time is stimulating and motivating for teacher and students. Padlet is visually engaging, especially if contributions incorporate graphic design or are accompanied by images. Most notably, it allows for a specific mode of conversation and feedback, i.e. written but close to real-time, somewhere between spoken conversation and old-fashioned written communication. This brings Jaidev and Chan's "conference" between tutor and individual student (2018, p.207) into an online group setting.

It's not necessarily for everybody, and care must be taken that students (and teachers) who do not find it a particularly natural or comfortable way to communicate are not excluded. But the same is true of all teaching methods. Padlet provides a different and potentially extremely valuable way of teaching and learning.

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Biography

Dan Bernstein is a Language Development tutor at UAL. He teaches discipline- and course-specific language and communication in relation to various fields of art and design, and liaises with course teams across Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon Colleges of Arts in order to provide the most focussed and useful possible support and guidance for students with English as an additional language. Dan's practitioner research focusses mainly on how language teaching and learning can be embedded within the daily life of academic courses.