

Finding Your Voice: Teaching Writing Using Tablets with Voice Capability

***** On the Internet *****

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Vance Stevens

Higher Colleges of Technology / CERT / KBZAC, Al Ain, United Arab Emirates
<vancestev@gmail.com>

Introduction

For some time, I have been developing techniques for teaching writing using Google Docs, starting a few years back, when my students and I were all in the PC environment. At that time, the students would open documents and share them with me, and then I would provide feedback as best I could. The quality of the feedback in the Google Docs environment had always been superior to that possible by other means, especially where the class sizes were large or the students not particularly motivated or attentive. With Google Docs, it was always possible to view student writing while students were writing it, and then work one-on-one with whichever students were engaged in the process at the time. This process is possible because the teacher can display any student's work on the teacher's personal device, or display it on the class data projector to correct it there, while the student follows on his or her device.

The work could, of course, be corrected asynchronously, after class, while the students were not present. Recently, I was correcting a student's work in my office when the student was in a lecture elsewhere on campus. The student, from his class, was following my corrections in real time and responding to them, multitasking (and perhaps neglecting the lecture). Clearly, the student was engaged by working with a teacher one-on-one in real time, addressing feedback on his writing wherever he happened to be, and whenever, not just during our class time. I thought to capture the interchange in a screencast (Figure 1), which can be viewed live: <http://screencast.com/t/fmW5zZoZUF>, or on my blog (Stevens, 2015a).

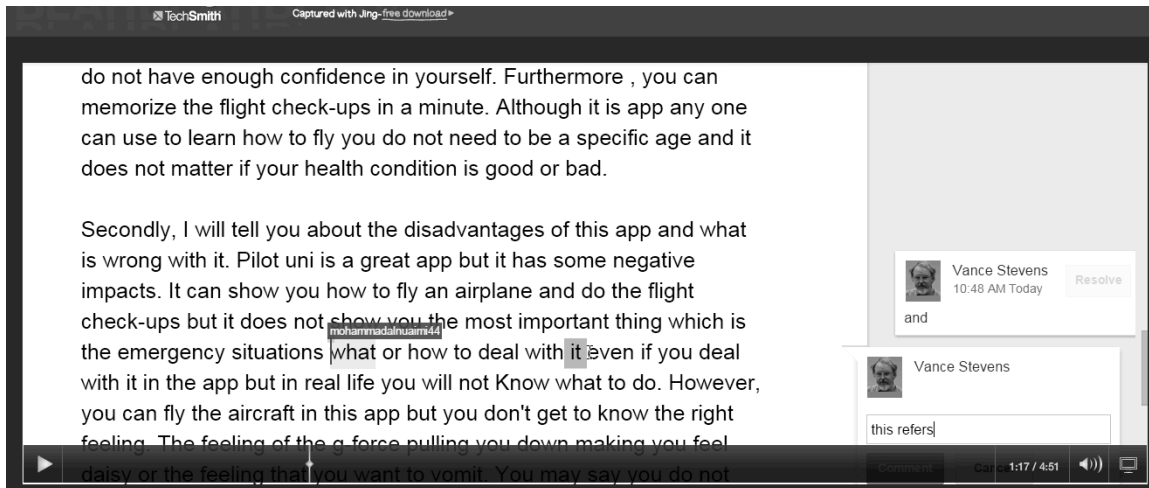


Figure 1. Still image from a screencast showing how teachers and students can interact synchronously in Google Docs

When the college where I teach adopted the iPad, I had to get used to the fact that the students had a different set of apps to work with while I mainly used my PC (with PC I retained superior keyboard functionality and had better access to my organized file structure in Google Drive). The students were able to cope with the iPad environment and use the touch keyboard to enter text despite its annoying limitations. But gradually, I came to realize that the iPad and other tablet and mobile devices are particularly attuned to voice input. I began to experiment with ways that the option for voice input could augment the task of writing, since much of the data entry work that had been tedious in the past could in fact be simplified through use of voice activation on iPad.

This piece is about interjecting voice, literally, into writing. It is about utilizing the apps you need to do that, Google Drive and Google Docs, organizing your Drive so that it can accept student work through an efficient content management system, and possibly getting students themselves talking into Google Docs as a way of getting started, if they prefer that to drafting on paper.

Finding your voice

With the introduction of digital tools into the writing process, and with texting influencing writing, as suggested in David Crystal's *The gr8 db8* (2008), or in Pegrum (2009, as in this example from p. 1), writing appears to be converging more and more with its oral/aural origins.

There was a time when students began essays about their holidays with phrases like 'During the holidays...' or 'Over the term break...' Many still begin that way. So imagine the surprise of a teacher in the west of Scotland who, wading through students' essays in 2003, came across this text:

*My smmr hols wr CWOT. B4, we usd 2 go 2 NY 2C my bro,
his GF & thr 3 :-@ kds FTF. ILNY, its gr8. Bc my Ps wr so {:-/
BC o 9/11 tht they dcdd 2 stay in SCO & spnd 2wks up N.
Up N. WUCIWUG - 0. I ws vvv brd in MON. O bt baas & ^^^^.*

AAR8, my Ps wr :-) — they sd ICBW, & tht they wr ha-p 4 the pc&qt...
IDTS!! I wntd 2 go hm ASAP, 2C my M8s again. 2day, I cam bk 2 skool.
I feel v O:-) BC I hv dn all my hm wrk. Now its BAU ..

It's on topic. It's a narrative of sorts. It's reasonably coherent. It conveys its message forcefully, if a little unsubtly. But can you read it? If you can't, you're far from alone. Many people who aren't 'digital natives' – who don't belong to the 'net generation' – struggle with it.

Lindsay Clandfield has an interesting presentation as a part of his repertoire (Clandfield, 2014) in which he points out that when writing first was used, it was to record what someone had said, either to tell a story on a cave or pyramid wall, or to use a scroll prepared by a scribe to issue forth an edict or proclamation made orally by an authority, to whom writing might have been a painstaking and specialized skill best left to technicians. Texting circumvents spelling conventions and reduces keystrokes to concise representations of what the words sound like. Clandfield sees with this trend as well as the new emphasis on communicative methods a return to oral tradition in writing. In his words:

Communicative approaches to language teaching have put much value on the oral skill. Classrooms around the world have, over the past thirty years, devoted more and more time in class to speaking, which is generally seen as a good thing. Writing however, has remained relatively unchanged. Often assigned for homework, or in the form of longer pieces of writing (the composition, the essay, the business letter) this skill has just not seemed as interesting as speaking. However, due to technological developments we are all writing now a lot more than we used to. In some cases, we write more to people than we talk to them. (2014, n.p.)

Using PC and iPad together

Giving feedback on writing is a challenge that does not scale well. Teachers are well aware of how tedious it is to give quality feedback on student writing, paper after paper, mechanically by hand. My work with Google Docs has been an effort to develop techniques for correcting student work as efficiently as possible. My classes are normally large for writing classes, with more than 20 students, and giving meaningful feedback on work prepared by hand on paper, in conjunction with sufficient writing practice, is hardly feasible. Additionally, when I annotate paper drafts submitted by students, my feedback is rarely acted on; whereas in the Google Docs environment, students will more often read and respond to my comments. This allows me to deal with classes of 20 students as the work comes in, effectively and efficiently. It's more efficient for the students as well, since they can focus only on only the issues I have flagged, without having to rewrite parts of the paper on which I have not commented.

Techniques

The essence of what I have learned over several years of using Google Docs with students is illustrated in Figure 2.

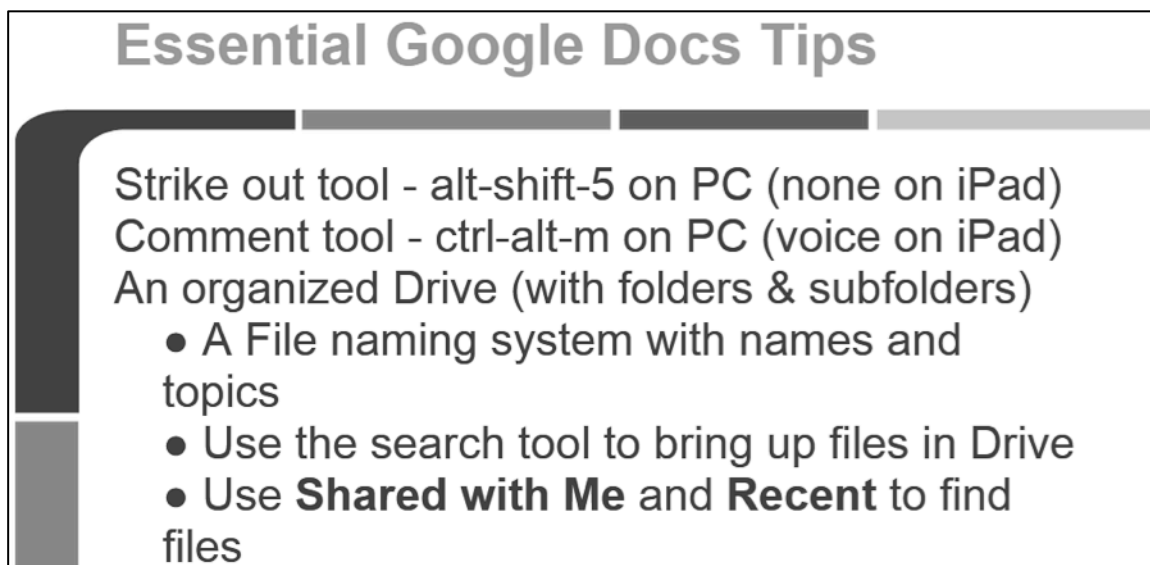


Figure 2. Shortcuts and tips for using Google Docs in teaching writing

When I first started using Google Docs I used to make corrections to text that are tedious on a PC and even more so to do on an iPad. Also, I had little evidence that my students ever went back to the text to view such details let alone correct them, and so I assume they did not internalize very well what I was trying to make them aware of. I finally settled on just two tools that appear to work best when correcting student writing: the strikeout tool and the comment feature. These are great time-savers when scaled over numerous correction tasks, especially as both have keyboard shortcuts on PC, which make them quick to implement. For strikeout, you merely highlight some text and press alt-shift-5, ~~like this~~. To make a comment, you highlight the text and press ctrl-alt-m (on PC), then type your comment. My correction technique has distilled almost entirely into using these two tools. Now I find that my students often ask about the comments, and gratifyingly, even correct their work in response to them.

I usually correct student work, whether created on iPad or PC, on a PC. Google Docs on iPad has some omissions, one of which is an obvious strike-through tool. It's a multi-step process to reach this screen: select the text you want to strike-through, touch the format menu, and finally touch the icon you want (to get at the full range of format features you find on PC, you have to revert to desktop view, where you then lose some useful iPad functionality).

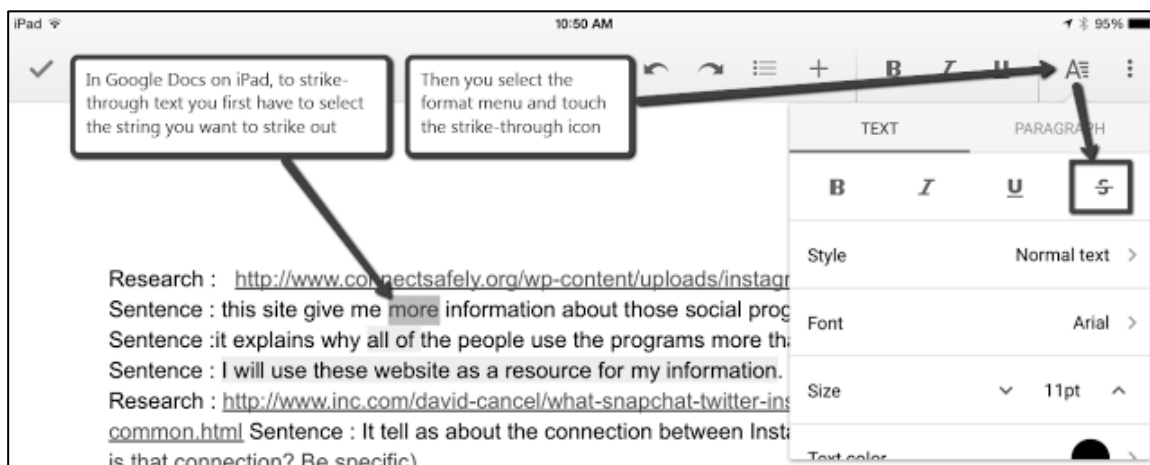


Figure 3. How to strike through text on iPad

Similarly, leaving comments on iPad is a matter of selecting text and then pressing the comment option. Leaving comments using the iPad touch screen keyboard might be relatively awkward compared to invoking **ctrl-alt-m**, and then typing on a PC, but here we find a time-saver native to iPad and mobile devices in general (Figure 4). On these devices you can activate voice input, which makes it possible to mingle with students, observe their work, bring up their files on your iPad, and literally speak your suggestions into their texts as you move from student to student.

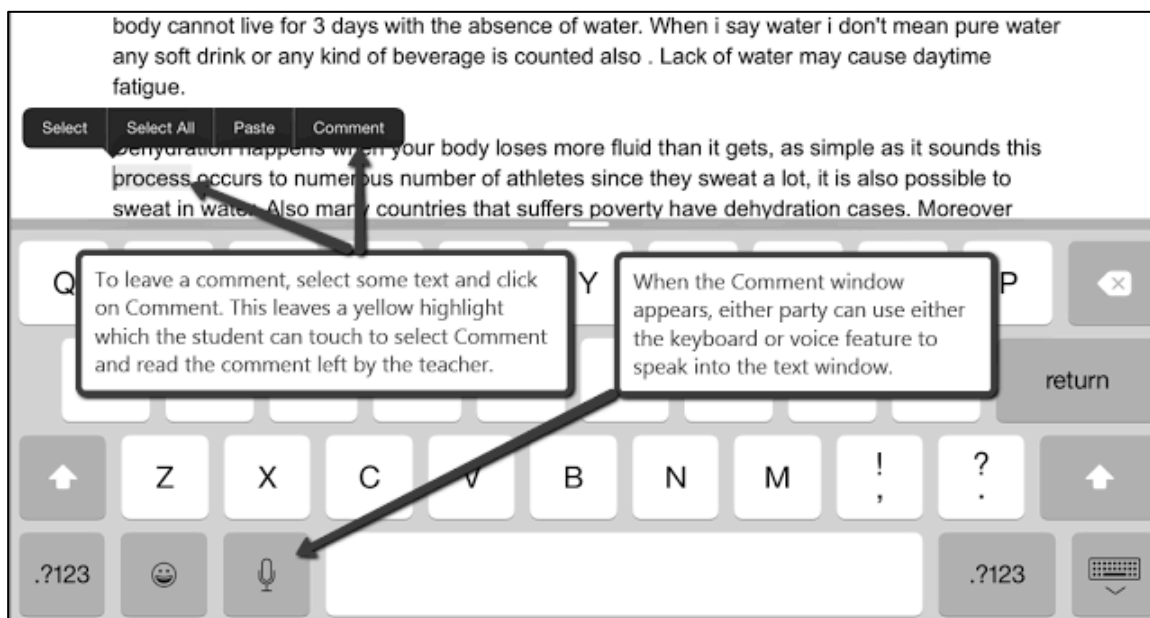


Figure 4. iPad allows option of typing or speaking comments in Google Docs

When managing large numbers of student submissions, it is essential that you set up a logical file structure in Google Drive. When students share documents with you, they can

be found under the 'Shared with Me' tag, but if you have several classes or several assignments that students share with you, you soon see the benefit of creating folders for classes and for separating assignments into those folders. Google has changed the way that drive looks in the folder view. It used to be that when you "moved" a doc to a folder its tag was removed from Shared with Me, which uncluttered the shared view. Then Google programmers decided not to "move" the file but to leave it tagged both places (in the Google system nothing really moves; files are simply tagged, so this means the files in *Shared with Me* now retain rather than lose that tag and so remain visible in the Shared with Me view). Assigning them a new folder, that is, adding that folder-name tag, means they can be viewed also in that folder, which is really a way of aggregating content according to the folder name under which files so tagged are viewed. In short, if you are working with dozens or hundreds of files, you need to tag them so as to organize them efficiently in Drive (Google has often changed the way this works, looks, and feels, but this is the system at this time of writing).

Of course, you can find your files by searching for them, but this can be tedious if you want to view the work of a particular class. Tagging them so they appear to be in folders is more convenient. Still, one great affordance of Google Docs is that the hundreds or thousands of files you have are all searchable. You can find files easily by entering a keywords or phrases in their contents or in a part of the document name; this is one reason to impose standard naming conventions on files that students create and share with you (and since they share them giving the teacher editing rights, the teacher can always clean up file names so they fall under the convention). I include students' names as part of my convention, since in PC view, user names are given in the drive listing, but in iPad view, only email addresses of file creators might be given, which might not help you identify your students.

Another affordance of Google Docs for students is that they can easily share their work with one another. This is a bonus if they are working collaboratively on projects, but some may inevitably be tempted to copy/paste each other's work into their own documents and claim it as their own. So yet another convenience for teachers: having your students' work in one searchable space is a quick and easy solution to the feeling you get when you realize you have read something before but can't quite place where, or in whose submitted work. If you think something has been shared improperly between students you have only to type in the text and all instances of that text in your drive database will appear on your screen. In this case, I typically print the documents in question and give copies to the students involved, which usually makes it clear to them that they have been exposed and that I have the power to expose plagiarism easily.

Other voice tools on iPad and PC

My EFL students are not able to get the voice tools working for them as well as I can. For them, the voice recognition engine stumbles on their mispronunciations and intonation, their inexperience with working with voice (as when they blurt asides while speaking, or don't enunciate clearly into the mic), and mainly from the ambient noise in the classroom. So I give them the option in class of writing a first draft or brainstorming on paper and then, after collecting the paper, I read their handwritten work into Google Docs. Normally, I use the iPad to read from their handwritten papers directly into a

blank Google Doc they have shared with me beforehand. I have that same document open in a PC, where I can most efficiently clean up any voice-input errors using the PC keyboard.

Before trying out voice directly in Google Docs, I had tried third party tools, such as Dragon Dictation (<http://www.nuance.com/for-individuals/mobile-applications/dragon-dictation/>), which does a good job, when the speaker enunciates clearly, in identifying allophones and making a best guess at typing out utterances from words stored in its comprehensive database. I used this tool on the iPad to model writing for the students and project it at the head of the class. I prompt them and elicit from them their expression of points that fit a model I was trying to inculcate, and as they told me in class what they thought we might write, I would read it into Dragon Dictation and it would all appear on the screen in legible font when projected from iPad onto the whiteboard. I chose this tool mainly for its clear display when projected on the data show device. The result could then be exported to other apps for manipulation in appropriate tools.

You can also dictate and improve handwritten essays directly into a PC in a single interface. My favorite tool for this is Dictanote (<https://dictanote.co/>), which combines speech-to-text capability with the functionality of a digital notepad, allowing you to make corrections to the transcribed text as you speak it in a way that other similar applications don't; thus, you speak into Dictanote and make corrections on the fly. One problem with speech-to-text tools is that you need to know how to punctuate using voice, but with Dictanote you can simply join up text or enter the carriage returns where needed more easily than with counterpart tools on tablet devices or PC. There's a full set of text processing tools available, even an autocorrect tool (though it doesn't know when users are trying to say the name of the product). Still, you can do preliminary work in Dictanote and copy your text from there into Google Docs the way you want it (Figure 5).

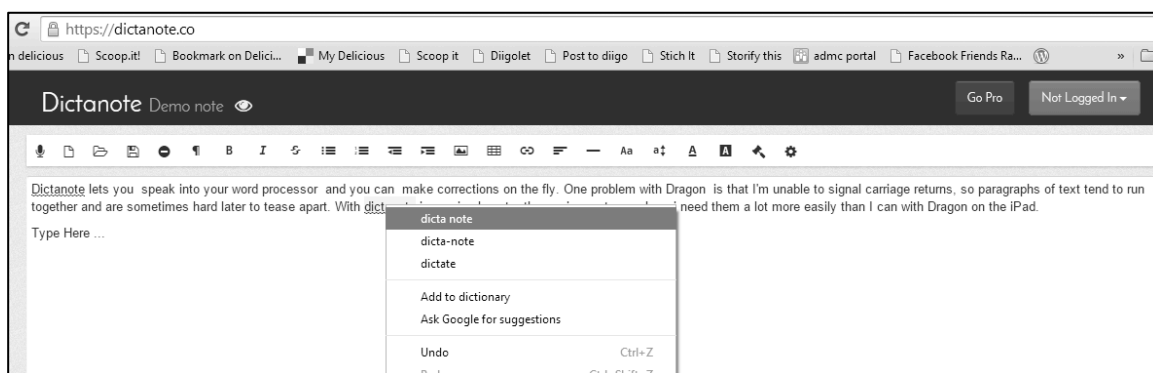


Figure 5. Dictanote in action

The capabilities of these tools used in conjunction with one another on mobile and desktop devices open many other possibilities adaptable to language learning contexts. For example, one advantage of using speech recognition engines is that while you are recording into them, you can create a simultaneous audio recording on another device, using, for example, Audacity on a PC. This recording can then be used as a listening component to accompany the text. I find results of such recordings good for EFL learners because I speak distinctly during voice input, and if anything too slowly for Audacity, but it is an easy matter to go back into the recording to remove gaps and close up the utterances. Examples of more practical applications are given in Stevens (2015b).

Once you learn how to speak punctuation into your iPad or dictation-enabled device, life gets even easier. This screenshot from a Lifehacker post illustrates the process (Figure 6).

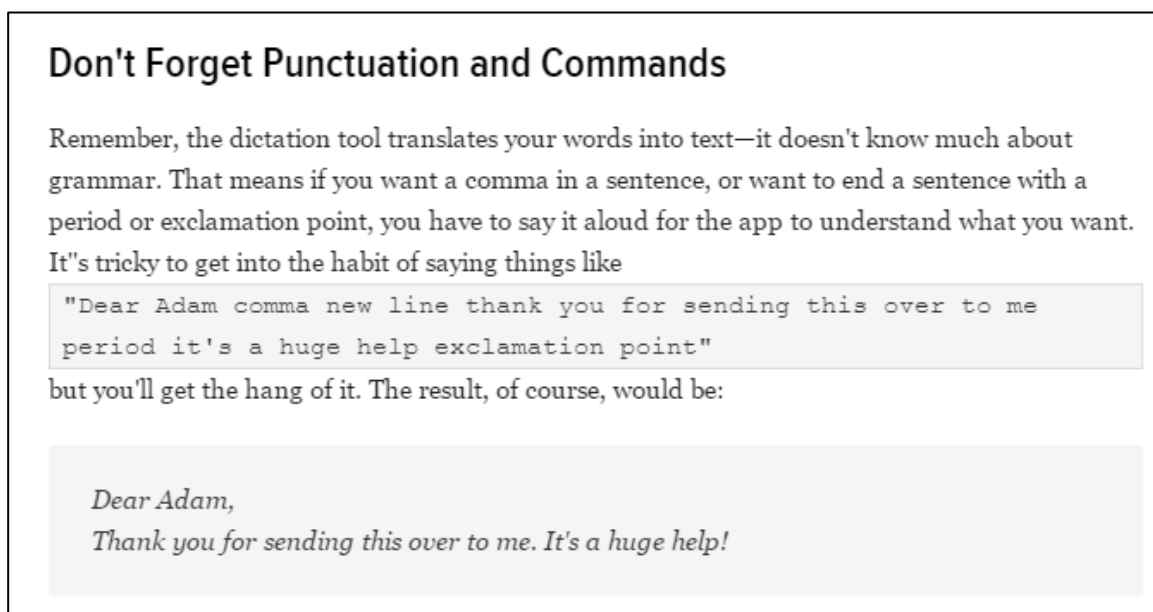


Figure 6. From Lifehacker, <http://lifehacker.com/5928902/how-to-talk-to-your-mac-using-dictation-effectively>

Other tools for writing with impact

Google Docs Story Builder

Apps can be found to address all stages of the writing process, and many allow voice input in content creation. One tool my students enjoy for brainstorming is called Docs Story Builder, available from <http://docsstorybuilder.appspot.com>. Technically, it's not an app; it's a website accessible via browser. But GDSB allows students to construct dialogs and then play them back in quick typewriter succession to selected musical accompaniment.

This tool encourages students to have fun while creating short dialogs, such as to brainstorm ideas for a writing project. Disappointingly, I have been unable to get its

music to play on the iPad (so I play what the students produce on my PC), but their conversations can be created in text or even spoken into the iPad, and a URL generated which can be shared with the teacher, or when students are logged into their Google accounts, shared on Google+. It's quick, and entertaining when the results are played on the teacher PC via the audio system from the front of the room.

These are some samples from my students brainstorming ideas for IELTS-style essays:

- <http://docsstorybuilder.appspot.com/UrwheJQun> – Fast Food, jazzy
- <http://docsstorybuilder.appspot.com/4lLSbXEAn> – Driving fast, schmalzy
- <http://docsstorybuilder.appspot.com/0zwCdc28j> – Bicycles, driving beat



Figure 7. Tutorial for Google Docs Story Builder, with a QR code that takes you there

I created this tutorial on how to use Google Docs Story Builder (its first slide shown in Figure 7; <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1QPWWMNQvxHLCkmbBq4y7tsbkbuVfA72IoaplaAtf6gQ/edit?usp=sharing>.) There are other tutorials for Google Docs Story Builder online, for example, Reading, (2015), and many more available through Google search.

Today'sMeet

As mentioned above, if students are logged on to Google, they can save their stories to their Google+ accounts or they can generate a link that they can copy and paste to a shared space. One such space that is very convenient to set up and use in class is Today'sMeet (<https://todaysmeet.com/>). Here a "room" can be created by anyone with or without a Today'sMeet account, and which anyone can access just by clicking the URL.

Because it does not require a login, teachers can create rooms in seconds, in which all their students can write, and click on links that anyone else has posted (Figure 8).

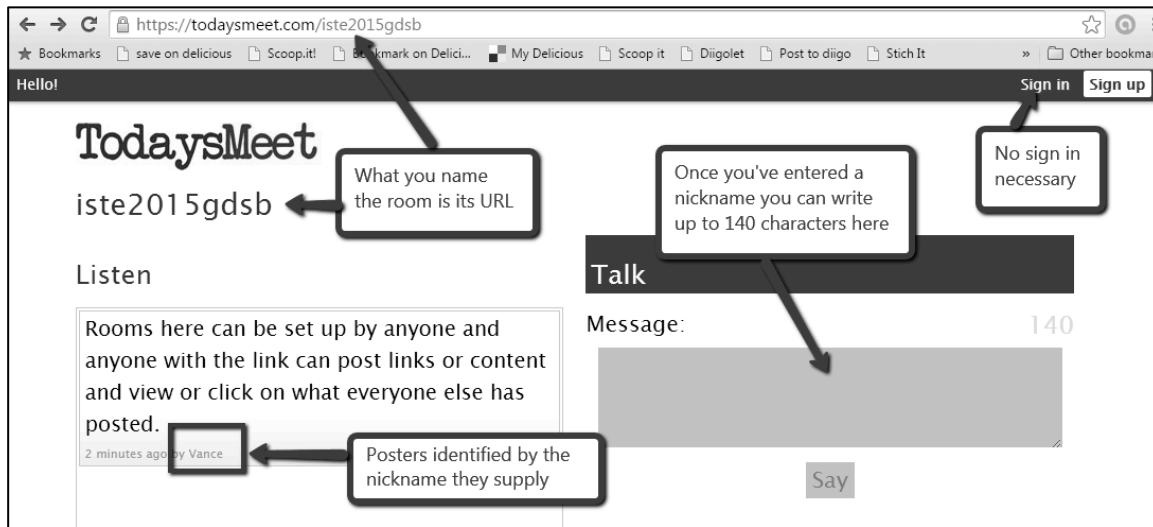


Figure 8. Today'sMeet for creating a common space to share links and backchannel thoughts

Another such space that I find useful is Chatwing (<http://chatwing.com>). One difference between this and Today'sMeet is that membership in Today'sMeet is of limited duration. You can choose the duration, but the greatest duration for a free account is one month. Another difference is that Chatwing rooms require users to provide credentials, but they last, as far as I can see, forever. Therefore, Today'sMeet might be the best choice for a class where ease of access is desired and there is no need to remember what happened in the chat longer than a month after it happened. Chatwing spaces are appropriate when you wish to retain an archive populated by known users and build on it.

In Conclusion

Because the playing field is constantly in flux, there is always much to learn about using the tools available on tablet devices in educational contexts. Often subtle changes to tools appear without fanfare and are sometimes noticed only after having been available for some time. When I show colleagues what appears in hindsight to be obvious, for example, "Did you know you could speak voice comments into Google Docs?" This often triggers an 'aha' moment. My explorations into app-smashing voice and some of the other tools mentioned into an environment to enhance student writing have been enlightening to me, and have prompted me to learn more and to refine my techniques, and to develop explanations that are approachable by a range of educators. This article is the latest in a series where I have tried to track and archive what I have learned about how it has become possible to literally allow writers to interject their voice into their writing, and into providing feedback in the teaching of writing.

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