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# FOUR GREAT TECH TOOLS TO TRY TODAY

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In the classrooms of 2020, tech tools have become even more important as teachers seek to meet the needs of their students in socially distant, virtual, and hybrid environments. The number of tech tools available and the large number of demands on teacher time can make the selection of these tools even more difficult. In this column, I will share four great tools that I have used in my teaching this fall. These tools have all been helpful in navigating the teaching challenges of today's classrooms, effective in engaging students, useful in a wide variety of classroom settings, and are all free!



I was first introduced to Loom in the spring of 2020 when my son's teacher was using it to present content during remote learning. As a screen and video recording tool, [Loom](#) (2016) has since become a go-to tool in my teaching. Using Loom, teachers can create screen recordings, videos of themselves, or screen recordings that include a "bubble" with an image of the teacher. I have used Loom videos to model or [explain assignments](#), for instructional or [tutorial videos](#), and to "flip" instruction. Once recorded, Loom videos are saved to their website and can be shared with others using the generated link. An embed code can also

be generated, making it useful to post the videos on pages and within assignments on Canvas in order to provide the videos to my students for online viewing. I also have found it useful to email the links to colleagues as I provide PD on new technology tools. Loom's desktop app is also very helpful since the ability to create a new video is only a click away. Loom accounts are free for all basic users; however, as a part of Loom's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Loom's Pro account is now [free for students and teachers \(2020\)](#). In addition to providing information on how to upgrade to the free account, Loom provides additional resources and ideas to teachers on ways to use Loom in the classroom.



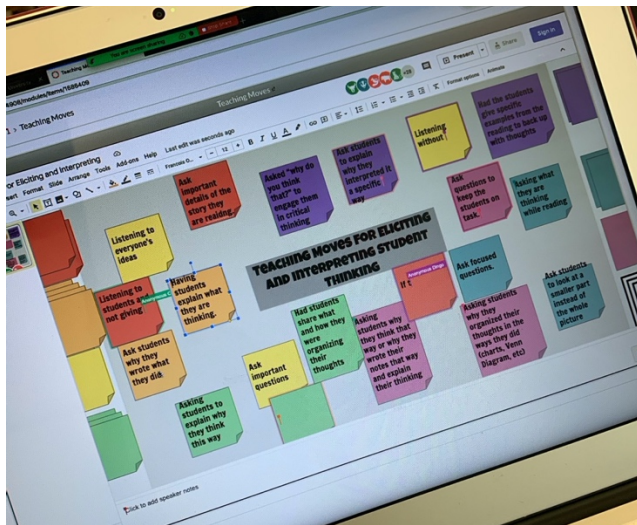
### **Google Slides**

Although Google Slides are not new, socially distant teaching has inspired me to use this platform in ways I never have before. Post-its and chart paper are tools that I would

frequently use in my classroom to collect student brainstorming or organize thinking around a certain topic. Sometimes these tools would be used to complete an activity like a Chalkboard Splash (Himmele & Himmele, 2017) where students respond to a prompt and then display their answers to share their thinking with the class. Since we are limiting the sharing of materials and movement in the classroom, I created a new way to have my students engage with course content in meaningful ways. Using a Google Slides template and post-it shapes that I adapted from [Matt Miller's post \(2018\)](#), my students grabbed a post-it from the side and then added their thoughts to the slide to brainstorm about our topic. Once their ideas were on the slide, we organized by moving similar ideas together.

### **Figure 1**

*Students use Google Slides to collect and arrange their ideas in real-time during class*

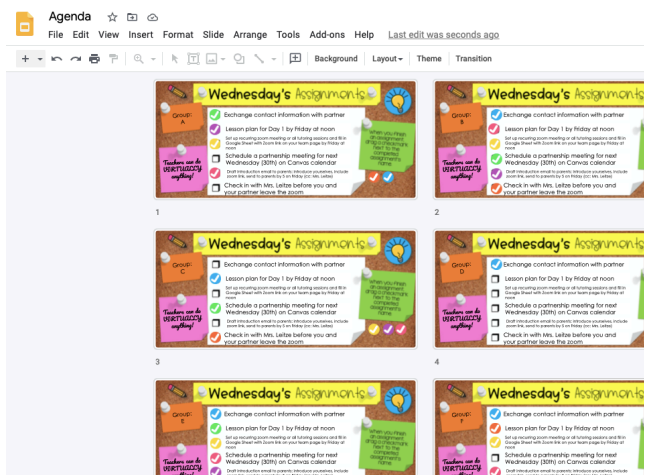


Another Google Slides application resulted from reflection on the first couple of weeks of teaching with Zoom. While I value the opportunities for my students to “turn and talk” in the physical classroom, I was struggling with applying these opportunities to the virtual classroom. I was using prompts and sending students to breakout rooms, but I was frustrated with the engagement (or lack thereof) that I would observe when I would join their rooms. For the next class, I decided to use Google Slides to add some accountability to their work. I wanted my students to be able to consider many different categories and add their brainstorming to each one. With a shared Google Slide deck, students could move between slides and add

their thoughts and I could observe the work being done by watching the slides and not needing to be in each breakout room to help hold my students accountable, assess their understandings, and help appropriately pace my instruction. The following week, students used a Google Slides template that I created for them to prepare a short presentation and then share their work with the whole class following their breakout sessions. In another class, students had multiple things that they needed to complete in order to prepare for the next week. I adapted the agenda slides from [Jennifer Findley \(2020\)](#) so that each of my pairs had their own agenda checklist slide in one shared slide deck.

**Figure 2**

*An example of agenda slides being used to track group progress during a Zoom breakout session*



engagement and moved beyond using Google Slides simply to present information.

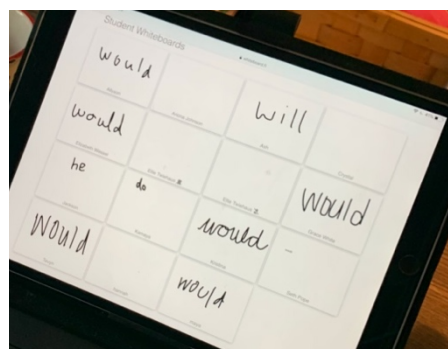
WHITEBOARD.fi

Free online whiteboard tool for teachers and classrooms!

Whiteboard.fi (2020) is a new-to-me tool this semester. This tool is the digital version of individual whiteboards used in the classroom. As I was demonstrating a cloze activity for my students over Zoom, I had them write or type on their whiteboards what words they thought went in the blanks. Similar to in-person use, the whiteboards allowed me to see all students' thinking and increased engagement during our online class session.

**Figure 3**

*Students answers on whiteboard.fi*



Using a shared slide deck that we were all able to access, allowed me to see in real-time how the groups were moving through the tasks, even when I was not in the same breakout room with them. Students would document their progress on the agenda items by clicking and dragging the circles with checkmarks from the lower right-hand corner to each item's checkbox as they finished. Since I was using Zoom on my computer to interact with my students, I choose to view the slides using my iPad so I could have multiple screens. Using multiple browser tabs would be another option if only one device is available. Each of these applications of Google Slides helped me increase student



Seesaw (2013) is a learning journal tool that caters primarily to the elementary classroom. In a previous issue of the Indiana Reading Journal, I wrote about [how to get started with Seesaw \(2017\)](#). I continue to use Seesaw as a way to help students document their learning.

In my classroom this semester, Seesaw has also been a tool I have used to help me build classroom community. When we might have circulated to get to know each other with conversations and community-building activities in person, this semester, we created digital collages on Seesaw. While viewing the collages, students found classmates who had similar interests to connect with. Students also posted pictures of what they look like without their masks on and recorded a voiceover of their names, so we could meet each other and learn to properly pronounce each person's name. In another course, students recommended books

that they liked using a note and drew pictures of their favorite leisure activities. The options for using Seesaw for building classroom community are limitless.

New to Seesaw since my original article is the activities feature. This feature allows teachers to create their own activities to assign to students or choose from a curated set of activities created by other Seesaw teachers. For a recent class, I wanted my students to do a sorting activity considering options for proactive and reactive discipline in the classroom. I had my students sort some options that I had created and then had them add some of their own ideas as well.

#### Figure 4

*Seesaw activity example*



While my example is fairly specific to my content area, many teachers have shared other activity examples that could be used in any classroom. Activities can be sorted by grade and subject area. Some examples of available activities for literacy include phonics skills, reading responses, sharing student writing, book reviews, and fluency practice. These ready-made activities are available for Seesaw teachers to assign to their students and use immediately.

### **Conclusion**

Teacher time is at a premium in 2020 even more than in years past. Planning engaging lessons and sifting through tech tools can be time-consuming. It's my hope that these four free tech tools will give you something you can pick up and add to your lessons this week. I hope they are as useful in your teaching as they have been in mine.

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