

eTools: Using Google Hangouts in the Classroom

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Introduction

Not only do online and hybrid courses offer limited opportunities for face-to-face engagement with students, but also they make the use of guest speakers challenging due to the limited or non-existent physical classroom space. Google Hangouts offers instructors a solution to these potential problems as this user-friendly technology can be used for virtual meetings with students as well as virtual guest lectures in online, hybrid, and even face-to-face class environments.

What is Google Hangouts?

Google Hangouts is a free online tool that can be used to facilitate audio and video conferences. With Google Hangouts, anywhere from two to 25 people can take part in a synchronous video chat. However, when combined with YouTube Live's broadcasting capabilities, instructors can choose to make a Google Hangout public for a global audience with no maximum participant limit. This means Google Hangouts can be used to live broadcast an instructor-led virtual lecture and archive the talk on YouTube for viewing at a later time. This technology provides a way to mimic the live lecture environment in an online/hybrid class, and make that lecture available to students who were not able to attend the live discussion.

How can I get Google Hangouts for use in the classroom?

Instructors and students wishing to use Google Hangouts will first need to register for a free Google account at www.google.com. (Users who have a Gmail account automatically have access to Google Hangouts.) Other equipment needed are a computer with a webcam/microphone and internet connectivity. Users should go to hangouts.google.com and download a plugin for their browser of choice in order to use this technology. When instructors are ready to start an individual session with students that will not be broadcast online or archived via YouTube, they will go to hangouts.google.com and click "Video Call." Instructors then will be taken to a virtual room where they can invite others via a link that can be copied and pasted into an e-mail message or linked through an online learning management system.

Instructors who wish to use the live broadcast and archiving option also will need a YouTube account, which is available at YouTube.com. To create a Google Hangout that will be simultaneously broadcast via YouTube and then archived after the hangout ends, instructors should go to https://www.youtube.com/my_live_events and click "New Live Event" at the top right corner of the screen. Instructors then will be taken to a screen where they can set the day/time of the event and customize the privacy settings for the event, with the option to make the event globally viewable or accessible only to those students who have a link to the event. Both Google Hangouts and the YouTube Live feature are free of charge.

How can I use Google Hangouts in the classroom?

Google Hangouts has many useful features. In particular, it can be used to:

1. *host virtual guest speakers.* One of the most useful functions of Google Hangouts with YouTube Live is its ability to host virtual guest lectures for students. No longer are instructors limited to individuals in their local communities for guest speaker events. With this technology, instructors can create web-based conferences with professionals around the world; this enables instructors to select a time outside of a regular class meeting, as students either can join in virtually from where they are (e.g., a dorm room, a computer lab, a coffee shop) or watch the guest speaker at a later time via a link instructors can provide at the end of the presentation. When using this feature in the face-to-face classroom, however, instructors should work with their university's IT services to ensure that the classroom computer and projection equipment can facilitate a web chat of this nature.

2. *facilitate interactive discussion in online/hybrid classes.* Google Hangouts can be used to facilitate a discussion in classroom environments where regular physical attendance in the classroom is limited or nonexistent. Instructors may choose to host optional or required regularly scheduled web conference sessions in which they clarify material or answer student questions about course content or assignments. If used with YouTube Live, these discussions can be broadcast live and archived online for students to watch at a later time.

3. *host virtual office hours.* Instructors who teach virtual courses or who work on campuses with large commuter populations may find Google Hangouts particularly useful in hosting virtual office hours. Instructors can create a hangout specifically for office hours, which means they identify a room in which they will be present and available for students to “drop in” virtually. This option eliminates the need for instructors to be on campus for office hours, and provides a great deal of flexibility in the time of day they need to be available to students.

4. *deliver a real-time lecture to a physically scattered audience.* On occasion, instructors may find the need to offer additional lecture material to clarify information delivered online or that simply did not get covered in a face-to-face session. With Google Hangouts, instructors can deliver a real-time lecture to an audience that connects virtually. Instructors who choose to use the YouTube Live events option with their hangouts can facilitate the virtual attendance of students who may not have a webcam, as YouTube Live events offers live text-based chat that accompanies the live broadcast. After the event is over, instructors can share a link to the recorded conversation that will be viewable until they choose to remove the event from their YouTube account.

5. *advise students off campus.* At many institutions, academic advising is a major part of a faculty member’s job expectations. Scheduling individual face-to-face appointments with all advisees can sometimes be difficult due to the number of

scheduling restraints imposed on both students and instructors. Using Google Hangouts for advising appointments offers greater flexibility in these advising situations.

6. *facilitate student-led online presentations and webinars.* Google Hangouts can be used by students to facilitate their own presentations and webinars. Students in charge of the presentation or webinar would invite participants, including the instructor, to the presentation, which empowers them to learn effective online presentation skills.

Conclusion

Google Hangouts is an accessible and user-friendly platform that can facilitate virtual discussions and presentations. Combined with YouTube Live's broadcast and archiving capabilities, this technology allows instructors the opportunity to create content for both a live and asynchronous audience. While its uses in the online and hybrid environment are numerous, instructors of face-to-face courses also are likely to find it helpful for meeting students who have difficulties traveling to campus or for empowering students to facilitate their own web-based presentations.