
USING GOOGLE CLASSROOM SUCCESSFULLY: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: In a time of pandemic, during which everyone is forced to find solutions to fit the requirements of the new reality, teachers are obliged to adapt in order to continue their task in creating positive contexts for the development of their students. The paper is an analysis of my experience in online teaching using the Google Suite, and especially Google Classroom. After a brief description of the Google Suite, I look at the general view and attitude towards this online teaching tool across the world as well as the one observed locally both with my fellow teachers and with the students. Then, I describe my personal experience and offer feedback using the actual data provided by the tool, with explanations concerning the fluctuation of student involvement in different periods of time. I conclude that Google Classroom, despite its disadvantages, is a useful tool for several reasons, among which I mention the fact that it is very user friendly both for the teachers as well as the students and even for parents (in younger students' case), it contains a range of features that can be time-saving and it is free, while offering the opportunity to continue doing online what used to be face-to-face activities.

Keywords: Google Classroom, online teaching, advantages and disadvantages

1. INTRODUCTION

The present worldwide situation caused by the COVID19 pandemic forced the whole globe to adapt rapidly to new ways of functioning. As if such a challenge alone was not difficult enough to sail through, people also had to find ways to continue working (at least those who could) remotely, using the tools offered by the online environment. Such is the case for teachers worldwide, who struggle to find meaningful ways of connecting to their students to ensure the success of this school year. To respond to the need, Ministries of Education, Inspectorates, publishing houses and independent businesses overload teachers with workshops, online courses and tools for teaching online, leaving everyone tired and sometimes even more confused, scared and stuck than they were at the beginning of the process of online teaching. In the midst of everything, teachers are doing the best they can and while a vast majority expect their return to the classroom, a small number, mostly teachers who were already involved in online teaching, but also some who managed to find their way through the myriad of options, confess that teaching online is both possible and rewarding.

As previously stated, there is a wide array of tools for online teaching, and choosing the perfect one could seem like a daunting task. However, being aware that perfection is more of an ideal than the reality, the present paper takes a closer look at Google Classroom, not as a perfect tool, but as a tool that proved successful in a Romanian school from Bihor County. With the help of the ICT teachers of "Mihai Eminescu" National College, the management implemented Google Classroom as the main online teaching tool for the school, as the use of only one online teaching tool allowed for an easier way of disseminating information. The ICT teachers created new e-mail addresses for both teachers and students on the school's web platform, that were to be used to log on Google Classroom. Every teacher received the list with all the students of the school and had to create his classrooms and invite all the students corresponding to the classrooms. This was a time-consuming task, but it was done once and then everything went quite easily.

2. GOOGLE CLASSROOM AROUND THE WORLD

Although our study depicts Google Classroom as a useful and successful tool for both teaching and learning, it is interesting to observe how teachers and students around the world perceive it. Because of lack of resources to sustain a study only for high school teachers and students, the following part looks research conducted not only in high schools, but also in universities. However, for this project, the results are enlightening, since the attitude is mostly similar, with an emphasis on the advantages of using Google Classroom for both teachers and students, despite the isolated cases in which the online tool was perceived as neutral. In addition, none of the studies presented below found the amount of disadvantages to be greater than that of the advantages, suggesting that the overall perception of Google Classroom is a positive one.

In a study entitled *Effectiveness of Google Classroom: Teacher's Perceptions*, Kaukab Abid Azhar and Nayab Iqbal (2018: 52-66) examine how Google Classroom as a teaching tool is perceived by a dozen of teachers from Pakistan who work in higher education in three different universities and have used the online teaching tool for at least a semester. Azhar and Iqbal's study concludes that "most of the teachers were neutral as they considered it as a small part of their overall teaching strategy", using the tool "for different purposes, such as uploading, announcing, and

assessing assignments online.”(60) The teachers stated that the interaction with the students improved due to the possibility of communication outside of the classroom, adding that an improvement was also seen in the organization of the classes and of the courses. (61) However, the teachers pointed out that both themselves and the students found Google Classroom difficult to use due to the lack of familiarity with the tool. (61) Moreover, the teachers were worried about the misuse of mobile phones by students during classes. (62) Therefore, this certain group of teachers did not perceive Google Classroom as extremely relevant to their teaching, with the mention that they used only a small amount of features from what the tool has to offer, mainly because they did not view it as user-friendly. (63)

Another article by Olha V. Bondarenko, Svitlana V. Mantulenko and Andrey V. Pikilnyak discussing the use of Google Classroom in teaching Geography concludes:

The advantages of using the specified interactive tool during the study of geographical disciplines are highlighted out in the article. As it has been established, the organization of the learning process using Google Classroom ensures the unity of in-class and out-of-class learning; it is designed to realize effective interaction of the subjects learning in real time; to monitor the quality of training and control the students' learning achievements in class as well as out of it, etc. The article outlines the disadvantages that should be taken into account when organizing blended learning using Google Classroom, including the occasional predominance of students' external motivation in education and their low level of readiness for work in the classroom; insufficient level of material and technical support in some classrooms; need for out-of-class pedagogical support; lack of guidance on the content aspect of Google Classroom pages, etc. Through the test series conducted during 2016-2017, an increase in the number of geography students with a sufficient level of academic achievements and a decrease of those with a low level of it was revealed. (Retrieved from <http://ceur-ws.org/Vol-2257/paper17.pdf>)

Therefore, despite the mentioned disadvantages, the improvement in students' achievements are a strong evidence of a high degree of efficiency resulted from the use of Google Classroom as a tool in the process of teaching.

As far as students are concerned, a study in the area of the Middle East states that “the familiarity in usefulness and ease of use” are considered “crucial features of Google classroom” (Al-Marroof & Al-Emran, M, 2018: 121) for the undergraduates. However, the study emphasizes that in order “to implement this technology practically, the higher educational institutions should provide the students with training-opportunities so that students' abilities to discover the comprehensive and effective features of Google classrooms will be more apparent and implemented widely by the end-users.” (Al-Marroof & Al-Emran, M, 2018: 121). On the other hand, Wijaya's (2016) study resulted from the 90 questionnaires completed by students specified that Google Classroom was perceived as both useful and easy to use.

Bhat et al (2018) analyzes the results of the usefulness of using Google Classroom in contrast to the more traditional methods. It is concluded that the advantages of using Google Classroom as an online tool outweigh the disadvantages, like the possibility of plagiarism, which can be easily resolved using a plagiarism check:

The teachers, as well as the students, who have taken part in this study express the need to migrate from traditional ways to more sophisticated ELearning tools so as to improve the overall quality of learning. [...] The introduction of concepts like reward points for the work done could not only innovate teaching-learning process but can also intrinsically enhance the performance. (Bhat et al, 2018: 134)

Heggart and Yoo (2018: 149-150) support the usefulness of Google Classroom, stating that “both the instructors and the students were broadly pleased with Google Classroom as a supplementary tool for classroom learning. Students used it both in class (when directed by the teachers and also to communicate and ask questions of each other) and outside of class to discuss readings and share resources.” Heggart and Yoo pointed out that four key concepts are vital in the success of Google Classroom, as well as any other online platform: accessibility, encouragement of collaboration, student voice/agency, and pace. The conclusion was that Google Classroom proved successful in respect to the first three concepts, while the concept of pace was unsatisfactory for some of the students, who felt that the amount of information and posts were overwhelming and that there was a sense of rush. However, the proper use of the tagging and filtering features of the tool might decrease the flow and, therefore, reduce the feeling of excess. As far as the teachers were concerned, the conclusion was that “a simple, easy to use and all-in-one solution, as teachers, we much preferred Google Classroom.” (150) Moreover, Shaharanee et al (2016) point out in a study published twice that the satisfaction of the students involved in their study qualify Google Classroom as an efficient tool, specifying that use of Google Classroom has the potential of improving both the teaching and the learning. In addition, Ramadhani et al (2019: 137) conducted a study having as sample 62 students from two high schools, with the following conclusions: firstly, there was an increase in the learning outcomes using Google Classroom compared with traditional learning; secondly, “students at the second level of high school felt

enthusiastic, motivated and eager to take part in learning in the classroom”; and thirdly, the learning was not restricted to the classroom, but could take place outside of the class as well.

3. WHY USE GOOGLE CLASSROOM?

A simple search offers countless web pages of information on the user friendliness of Google Classroom. On her web page, Alice Keeler (2014, Retrieved from <https://alicekeeler.com/2014/09/07/20-things-google-classroom/>) states 20 things that Google Classroom offers. Her blog post is followed by two others post, describing 15 additional uses of the tool in the former and then 10 more in the latter. Besides the obvious uses of Google Classroom, which are listed below, Keeler’s post also emphasizes the protection of privacy, a factor that, together with the increased security of the system, lead to our college’s decision upon using it. Thus, the reasons stated by Keeler are the following:

sharing resources, creating a lesson, making class announcements, going paperless, simplifying the turn in process, protecting privacy, reducing cheating, encouraging collaboration, creating a discussion, organizing assignment with due dates, capturing the middle of the process, e-mailing student, notifying students who may need help, assigning Q&A, creating an ad hoc playlist, e-mailing feedback, creating folders, linking directly, multiplying files in an assignment and easily viewing student submission. (Retrieved from <https://alicekeeler.com/2014/09/07/20-things-google-classroom/>)

Using research studies, Iftakhar (2016: 13) lists the benefits of using Google Classroom, also noting the list of Alice Keeler. However, Iftakhar emphasized the following aspects: “easy to use, designed to save time, cloud-based, flexible, free, and mobile friendly.”

4. CASE STUDY

As previously mentioned, besides the user friendliness of Google Classroom, the choice of the manager to implement the tool during the period of the pandemic was the security of the tool compared to other online teaching possibilities. In addition, the fact that the tool is free allowed everyone to access it and the way Google Classroom stores everything on the drive ensured the evidence of the work done.

After the first two weeks of using the platform, the management of the school compiled a statistical chart, which showed that 70% of the teachers started using Google Classroom, and from 50 classes in total, 31 classes had a student use 100%, 11 classes had over 90% student use, and the rest ranged between 67% to 89%. Therefore, more than half the teachers and the students started implementing Google Classroom successfully in less than 2 weeks. Moreover, the 100% presence is not a reality every time even in face to face classes. As far as the classes that I teach, the presence was sometimes better online than it was during some periods of the semester, since the sick children could be present from home. The only class that presented difficulties in participating were the students from the final year, who focused more on preparing for university admission. However, because of good communication between the school managers, head teachers and teachers on one side and the parents of the students or the students on the other side, the overall presence on the Google Classroom improved dramatically after the first online school council meeting. Therefore, Google Classroom as an online teaching/learning/assessment tool proved successful for the majority of teacher and students.

Not only older classes were involved in the program. All the school, including primary students, were invited to be part of the Google Classroom teaching program, and the success proved to be even greater. 7 years old, helped by parents, were 100% present for various reasons. Firstly, their love for the teachers and the possibility of keeping contact increased their motivation to get involved, solve tasks and receive their teachers’ praises. Secondly, learning basic reading and counting skills, since this is what they are supposed to learn in this period, keeps their motivation high. Thirdly, the presence of the parents to guide, support, encourage and help, ensured a positive flow from one side of the screen to the other. 10 years old were enthusiastic about using the platform because of several reasons. Firstly, children who are tech skilled and are allowed only limited screen time, have seen the possibility of using web tools as a reward. Having access to digital books and online interactive activities, students have the possibility of solving the tasks online and sending the screenshot as evidence of their activity. Such activities stirred enthusiasm even in low motivated students. Secondly, similarly to the case of the younger students, the presence of the adult family members increased the success of the activities. However, the young students expressed their preference for face-to-face classes because they miss their teachers. The older students declared that although the platform is great and could be used in the future as well, going to school was better because of the presence of their friends and of the class atmosphere, which could not be reproduced in the online environment.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Google Classroom, as an online teaching/learning tool is generally seen as beneficial because it is free, easy to use and it contains all the basic features that an online teaching tool should have to answer the possible needs. The present case study points out the successful use of Google Classroom, with the following evidence:

- The majority of teachers and students managed to use it successfully in less than two weeks.
- The online presence was sometimes better than the face-to-face presence.
- Both young and old students managed to use the learning tool for their benefit.
- Good communication between the school, represented by the school managers, the head teachers, and the teachers, and the beneficiaries of the learning process, represented by the students and their parent, led to the increase of use of the Google Classroom tool, in those cases that could potentially be problematic.

Therefore, the implementation of Google Classroom offered a proper context of teaching/learning/assessment during times of physical distancing. I hope that when teaching returns to the classroom, the study will continue in order to assess the use of Google Classroom not as primary tool in the teaching/learning/assessment process, but as a secondary one.

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