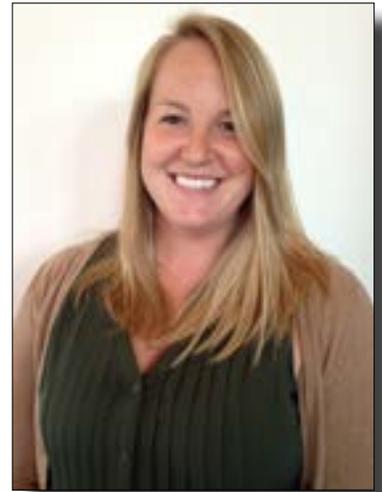


Alternative Discussion Formats

Silent Discussion

Small group and whole class discussions are a great way to formatively assess your students, but they present a few problems both for teachers and students when it comes to accurately assessing. For example, it is counterintuitive to stifle a robust discussion so you, as the assessor, can take accurate notes on who said what during the conversation, and of course, there is always the core group of willing speakers who do all the talking in a discussion and their more reserved counterparts who rarely share their ideas, even if they had deep insights related to the topic or text.

Seeking alternative discussion formats allows you to create an inclusive classroom that allows all students, even those with an aversion to speaking up, the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding through discussion. I've experimented with a few alternative discussion formats, and the one of my favorite and most successful was a "silent discussion" on *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton using Today'sMeet.com. This discussion format was easy to facilitate, engaged even my students prone to shyness, and left me with a transcript of everyone's comments that I could go back to and accurately assess after the discussion had ended.



Kelly Seefeldt is an at-large director for WCTE. She teaches at PJ Jacobs Junior High School in Stevens Point. Contact her at kseefeld@pointsschools.net

1 Getting Started

Today'sMeet is incredibly easy to set up and share with students. Without even signing in, you can create a "room," where the discussion will take place, and generate a direct link that can be shared with students. I simply posted the link to our class website to make it available on discussion day. Today'sMeet also gives you the option to create a QR code link to your room, and if you students will be participating with mobile devices, this would be an easy way to get them all to your room.

While you may have an established procedure for traditional classroom discussions, it will be important to clearly lay out expectations for the silent discussion before you get students in the room and discussing. Your expectations may vary depending on your classroom environment and the standards you are trying to assess.

Before we got started, I verbally explained the following expectations to my students and distributed a half-page handout, so they had a reference during the discussion.

- All students signing in to Today'sMeet.com will use their first name and last initial as their "nickname."
- Students should refrain from speaking during this silent discussion. Express your comments and thoughts in the discussion forum.
- Students are to maintain our classroom's respectful environment online and respond to each other's comments and questions in a thoughtful and responsible way.
- Students will be assessed on their ability to come to the discussion prepared, respond to questions and ideas posed by classmates, and ask their own questions that generate meaningful discussion. Posts to the discussion forum should not only demonstrate knowledge of the book (*The Outsiders*), but also an ability to engage in productive discussion with your classmates.

I also assigned a point value to meaningful student responses, as well as deep questions that generated further discussion, and gave students a total earned points available for the discussion. For our class, this was a formative assessment that would be in the grade book, so it had to have some point value associated with it. You could also assess students on a check +/- scale as well.

Finally, I explained how this silent discussion would work, and showed students Today'sMeet before they took out their devices. I demonstrated where to find the link on our website and how to join the room. I also explained that I would be monitoring the discussion from my computer, but the students would be responsible for keeping the "conversation" going in the forum.

Continued on next page

2

Facilitating the Discussion

Another helpful feature of Today'sMeet is the Projector View, located under Room Tools on the room creator's screen. Projector View shows only the discussion feed, removing the text box that allows you to contribute to the discussion. I used the dual screen setup connected to my SMART Board to show students the Projector View on the board while I maintained my ability to contribute to the discussion on my second screen. If you don't have a dual screen, you could always accomplish this by joining your room on a second device, like a laptop, Chromebook, or iPad.

Periodically throughout the discussion, I froze the Projector View screen after a good question was posed, so that students who need more time to think or type could continue to see the question they were responding to even after the scrolling feed of classmates' responses had pushed that question off their screen. If you choose to freeze on certain questions, explain to your students why and when you will be freezing. Even after explaining that they should look to the SMART Board if the discussion feed is moving too quickly for them, I still had students tell me in the debrief that they found it difficult to keep up with the feed on their Chromebooks because they weren't referring back to the frozen screen.

To kick things off, I posed a few questions that students had submitted via exit slips the day before. This gave students examples of the types of questions that would generate discussion, and gave them a starting point for their initial comments.

I wanted my students to focus on elaborating and responding to each other's comments and questions, as stated in the first speaking and listening standard for seventh grade, and in the beginning, I noticed students replying to one question at a time, and then moving on to an unrelated question posed by someone else. To facilitate more back-and-forth among students, I began posing secondary questions to specific students. For example, when a student responded to a question about why Johnny and Ponyboy enter the burning church to save children they didn't know with "Because they actually care although it may not seem like it, especially after the 'Bob incident.'" I followed up with "Jacob, good point. What does that say about Johnny and Pony's moral character?" Eventually, the students caught on and were interacting with each other in the forum on their own.

3

Debrief and Assessment

After wrapping up our silent discussion, I asked my students to respond to several questions about the discussion. First, I asked them to recall the most interesting point raised in the discussion. Next, I asked them about the format of the silent discussion and Today'sMeet; what did they like about it and what did they not like about it. Finally, I asked them if they preferred our traditional discussion format or the silent discussion and to explain the reasons behind their preference.

This debrief gave me very useful feedback from students on how to improve our next silent discussion, and an overwhelming majority of students said they enjoyed this type of discussion. Not surprisingly, many students who normally don't speak up during our whole class discussions, liked sharing their ideas silently in the forum.

During the debrief, one student was disappointed his question did not generate as much discussion, and he feared his grade would suffer. Luckily, Today'sMeet allows you to print a transcript of the discussion which is what I used to assess students. When I looked back in the transcript, I could see this student did ask a great question, it was just posted at the same time as two other questions and many responses, but because I had a written record of this student demonstrating the questioning and responding skills I was assessing, he earned full credit. The transcript of any room discussion can be printed, but only before the room is closed. Make sure you open up the Room Tools and click the Transcript link before you close your rooms.

Continued on next page

4

Final Tips

Finally, it should be noted that Today'sMeet offers a paid subscription service specifically for teachers, but I found that all I need to do can be done with the free version if you follow a few simple tips.

- Create an account for yourself, even though you can start a room without signing up.
- Create a new room for each class or group discussion.
- Distribute the direct link to your students via email, class website, or QR code.
- Set clear expectations and rules for nicknames, so students' skills can be easily assessed.
- Use the projector view and freeze on questions if possible.
- Print or save the transcripts BEFORE you close your room.

The last tip is probably the most important when assessing students, but if you accidentally close a room before you've saved your transcripts, there is a way to get them back. If you're signed in to your account (see the first tip) you can sign up for Teacher Tools with a credit card, open your closed rooms, and print the transcripts. I had to do this after my first silent discussion, and it was a huge relief. An added bonus was that Today'sMeet refunds any unused portion of the \$5 monthly subscription, so I was only charged 13 cents for the time it took me to print the transcripts from my closed rooms and cancel my subscription.

I hope you try out the silent discussion format with your students. Please feel free to share your ideas and feedback with me via Google Plus.