

Turning Point & Padlet: Using Technology in Small Group Teaching

Written by Benedict Docherty

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Throughout my six years of small group teaching experience I have regularly used power point and you-tube as visual aids and the basis of learning activities. However, last semester, following the lead of colleagues working on active learning in the Dept. of Politics at the University of Sheffield, I adopted Turning Point and Padlet in my Second Year Undergraduate Contemporary US Foreign Policy seminars. Turning Point is a form of audience response software that enables you to poll students through an interactive power point presentation. Students respond using the free smart phone app, and the results are displayed on screen. Padlet is a virtual bulletin board – easily embedded in your online learning environment – to which your students can post content. Think of it like them jotting down their responses on post it notes, and you collecting these in to display for the class. Both Turning Point and Padlet are free for students to access, and they don't have to create an account of their own, although you as the instructor will need one. My institution has a Turning Point licence, and I made use of the free version of Padlet which allows for 12 padlets.

Firstly, when employing technology or any learning activity it is important to ensure that it serves your learning objectives. Do not get distracted by the bells and whistles or possibilities of the technology, remember instead that it is a means to an end. In the context of my seminars they were a means to facilitate focused peer reflection and discussion. Secondly, you need to carefully think through the structure of your lesson plan and whereabouts you will use the technology and for how long. I tended to use Turning Point to ask 2-3 multiple choice questions at the start of each seminar as a warm up activity, before putting students into pairs to discuss their responses and the results of the room. Including discussion this took 10-15 mins of a 50-minute session. Padlet was used for students to record and present their responses to the group task, and so unlike Turning Point, was bolted onto an existing activity.

I had initially considered Turning Point only worthwhile in a large group lecture setting or for running a revision quiz. However, it has proved both popular and effective for engaging in students in small group settings of 12-20 students. Firstly, it enables students – particularly those lacking confidence – to genuinely express themselves. Polling is anonymous at the click of a button, so they aren't put on the spot in front of their peers, and until the results are displayed nobody knows which way the room will vote which mitigates against group think. As such, Turning Point can provide a "safe" way to gauge all knowledge and opinions and can help the more reticent contribute. Secondly, it provides a structured moment of reflection in response to a direct question – they must respond and pick a position or response. The outcome be that their own individual response and the results of the room, then serves as guide to future discussion. I tended to follow up with discussion of the results in pairs, but it could also be used to identify what students want or need to discuss more about a seminar topic.

The benefits of Padlet are in my view the same irrespective of whether it is a seminar of 20 students of a workshop with 90. It focuses student group discussions because they must first agree and then type up a concise response to the exercise – they can't just "talk", they have to "do". Each group's output can then be drawn on with ease in a plenary discussion, because everyone can see them onscreen and learn from what each other have "done". Indeed, the padlet page of responses is a ready-made revision resource for students to look back on – you can export the produced padlet as a pdf or image, thus saving the students work before you reset (wipe) the padlet for the next session.

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Be sure to practice before rolling out in the classroom, I had my fair share of technical missteps. Experiment! Turning Point can run true/false or multiple-choice questions and be used to generate word-clouds; you can repoll students and then compare results to see if their views have changed; for padlet you can ask them to input text or images. When using any new technology with students, remember that it's important to give clear instructions as to how to use it and take a moment to explain why you are using it. Time management is an important factor here, don't rush students through questions and ensure there is enough time in the session to discuss the results of polling and padlet work and so realise its full potential. Finally, consider equity – do enough students have a smartphone for you to use this technology as standard and if not if your dept can provide tablets for the session?

About the author:

Dr Benedict Docherty has published in the peer reviewed academic journals, *Global Responsibility to Protect* (2020) and *International Politics* (2021). He completed his PhD at the University of Leeds (2017) and worked as a Teaching Fellow at the University of Sheffield from 2017-2020. He is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and his previous affiliations include the British International Studies Association and Academic Council of the United Nations System. In addition to E-IR he has also written for The Conversation. He no longer works in higher education.