

LEARN NC

Digital posters: Composing with an online canvas

This article discusses tools and best practices for assigning digital poster-making projects to students.

BY KEVIN HODGSON

“Are we Glogging today?”

It’s a typical New England morning and our sixth grade students are all dutifully lined up in the fading autumn sunshine beneath the trees. Most schools typically have a series of fire drills toward the start of the year, and my school is no exception. I keep an eye on my class and chat quietly with my colleague who teaches science down the hall. She is eyeing the truck of the fire chief warily.

“I hope he doesn’t come through my room,” she whispers. I imagine a Bunsen burner left on or something. The fire officials come through random classrooms during fire drills, making sure that there are clear escape routes.

“Why?”

“The posters,” she says, “for the Scientific Method Fair. My room is covered with posters. Posters everywhere.”

Luckily, the fire chief doesn’t come into our wing of the school. On the way back in, I glance into my colleague’s room. Sure enough, there are three-paneled cardboard posters everywhere as our 80 sixth-graders prepare for the upcoming science fair for our school and families. I wouldn’t want to see the look on the fire chief’s face if he came in there, but what could she do? Posters of student work have been part of classrooms for a long time and few things have the potential to make learning so visible as a well-constructed poster of information.

What could she do? Well, she could move the entire project online, as I did a few weeks later, when each day, I was greeted at the door by students asking, “Are we Glogging today?”

Rethinking the poster

Educators have long had their students use posters for displaying student learning. A three-fold cardboard display hung in a public space is a great way of sharing, and in a classroom where different students are researching different topics on a similar theme, this postering approach can serve a double duty — showing an individual’s understanding of a topic (the poster creator) while providing insights into a myriad of topics (for the viewers). At our school, students in various grades periodically show off

Instructify

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Emphasizing the importance of design

Teaching the elements of design with young writers/composers is important, but not always easy. Here are some resources that might help educators frame the discussion with their students:

- [“Some ideas about composition and design elements, principles, and visual effects”](#) — a thorough explanation by Goshen College Emeritus Professor of Art Marvin Barvel.
- [“How to create a poster that graphically communicates your](#)

their work on poster boards for our entire school, often by setting up their work in a common space. The value is clearly that the learning can be disseminated across many classes of students in a short amount of time, and we all know that when one teaches others, his or her knowledge grows deeper. Events like science fairs and living history displays do have value, and like all new things, the use of online posters need not supplant these concepts completely.

When we talk about visual literacy — that element of purposeful construction of learning through a mixture of words and media — posters of all kinds have traditionally been a valuable assessment of learning (as long as it is the student making the poster, and not the parent). The choices that a student makes in designing a poster inform the learning of new materials, and allow a teacher a glimpse into the thinking of a student. The use of media to complement your ideas is the center of most poster projects, online or not.

The downside of physical cardboard posters, however, is that the publication is often short lived (who has the wall space for 20-odd posters at a time?); the information is fixed, in that text and images are just about the limit for what can be pasted onto a paper poster; and most posters end up in the garbage can or recycling bin when the poster has been graded and viewed. Other than being held for posterity sake by a few dedicated parents, most poster projects never even make it back home (or, if lucky, the blank poster board might get re-used for another project). I often notice posters in the trash can, forgotten now that the educational moment has passed. In fact, I often pull the work out and ask, "Whose is this? Maybe your parents want to see it."

I didn't want this inglorious end to happen to my students' work when I started designing a literature project during our reading of the young people's version of *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson. I wanted something that would continue on into the future, and provide an authentic publishing opportunity for my students with the world as their audience, as well as a way to integrate technology into the classroom in a meaningful way.

In considering how to engage and guide my young learners in this digital age, I often keep in mind the "[Framework for 21st Century Curriculum and Assessment](#)" put forth by the National Council of Teachers of English, which states:

Literacy has always been a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of particular groups. As society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the twenty-first century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies — from reading online newspapers to participating in virtual classrooms — are multiple, dynamic, and malleable.

With this in mind, Glogging fit the bill for me and my students.

Creating on a virtual canvas

What is Glogging? It's an odd moniker which morphs the words *graphic* and *weblog* together, but the term (which comes from the name of the site that hosts the Glogs)

[message](#)" — by Kathryn Tosney at the University of Miami. Includes numerous positive and negative examples.

- "[Creating effective poster presentations](#)" — by George Hess, Kathryn Tosney, and Leon Liegel. Includes a step-by-step guide that goes from planning to presentation.
- "[60-second poster evaluation](#)" — by George Hess at NC State. A detailed list of elements to look for when assessing posters.
- [Before & After magazine](#) — an online graphic design publication.

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- [Discovering linear functions through](#)

demonstrates yet another way that the tools emerging in the online world have the potential to engage learners and affect the way in which they relay what they are learning to a larger audience, including the potential of the world as readership.

“Glogs” are part of the Glogster network, but there are other virtual poster and bulletin board sites now up and running that might benefit students and teachers in different ways. Nota is a site that allows a user to create on a virtual canvas, although it does not seem designed specifically for the classroom. Another site — Magnoto — is also recently up and running on the concept of a virtual space where media can be moved and manipulated to meet your needs.

While I will focus here on how our sixth grade team is starting to use Glogster, the site you may want to use will depend on a combination of your goals for your students, the format of the expected presentation and your school’s own policies on privacy and student use of technology.

A virtual poster is a flexible platform, in that students can mix, mash-up, and use almost any form of media for a project on an online canvas. This means that along with a summary of understanding and reflections on a topic, such as a style of bridge or a profile of a mathematician, the student can also embed videos, audio files, images, and more on the poster where items are placed, and replaced, through the simple act of moving a mouse.

Glogster has a public site open for use by anyone, which is unfortunately not appropriate for students due to some of the content that is posted there by casual users, but the company has also has set up an educational arm of its platform that is geared towards safe use with students. The educational-based Glogster allows a teacher to set up a “virtual classroom” of 100 students, who are assigned randomly generated login information and passwords. While students can later add a username, that username is seen only by other students in their classroom (and I still suggest that no last names be used on any online site for safety reasons). All glogs remain private within the classroom until the teacher, acting as the site administrator, designates a glog “public,” which then publishes the work for other students in the bigger Glogster network. No student is identified by name, other than with the random login information.

Glogster has so far made this a free service for teachers and students, but the home page does display some advertisements. (I suggest using ad blocking software for all browsers, anyway). While there are other premium layers to Glogster that do cost money, the basic platform takes only minutes for a teacher to set up and get running and it doesn’t cost a penny. For budget-conscious school districts, that can be a blessing.

It’s showtime!

After spending one morning setting up my virtual classroom, I created my own example of a Glog as a way to walk through the process my students would go through for their literature project and to give me something to show as an example of some possibilities. My first Glog was a review of *Peter and the Sword of Mercy*, a novel by Dave Barry and Ridley Scott.

In class that day, I showed my Glog, explained how I went about creating it, and gave a quick tutorial to my students on how to use the Glogster site. They picked up the concept pretty quickly. They were very excited about the graphic design possibilities, and about being able to bring video and images right into their online posters. One real value

technology: Online course syllabus: Syllabus for online course Discovering Linear Functions Through Technology which helps teachers learn to integrate technology into the teaching of functions to help remove the mystery and engage students in deeper understanding of this important concept.

- Getting started in a 1:1 classroom: Online course syllabus: Syllabus for the online course Getting Started in a 1:1 Classroom which is designed to help teachers launch an effective technology integration approach where teaching and learning is enhanced by a 1:1 ratio of students and computers.

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of the educational Glogster is that only a teacher needs to have email to access the site. My students don't have their own email accounts through our school, and that lack of email is often a roadblock for us in using online sites for school work. In Glogster, once a teacher creates a virtual classroom, students are given computer-generated login codes and passwords. They can later change the passwords but not the login code, which is a collection of random letters and numbers designed to protect students' identity from the world. (One example for a login code for a student is **sk4nb9g**, so you can see that it would be difficult to identify an individual outside of our classroom.)

Once in the system, however, they can create identities that are seen only by members of our Glogster "classroom." A student who is logged into a virtual classroom can view the profiles of other students in that same classroom.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

Knowing that the multitude of possibilities and varied options of design in Glogster might distract my students away from the work that needed to be done, I designed a simple template of information that had to be included on the project. I used the theme of "three things" for the work to be completed. Not only did the "three" coincide with the *Three Cups of Tea* in the title of the book, but it kept a focus on my expectations of the students: The assignment was to create posters that demonstrated three things the students had learned about Islamic culture, three things they could do to change the world for the better, and three character traits of Greg Mortenson.

One important component of the assignment is that their rough draft of their writing had to be done offline first, on old-fashioned paper. Before they touched a computer, I had to see what they had done on paper. In my experience, if you don't have students complete their writing done before the computers get powered up, most will focus entirely on the technology, and not the writing.

A number of my students also had time to do the extension activity, which was to create a podcast book review and integrate their own voice right into their Glog project. Students also had the option of working in pairs, allowing the possibilities of collaboration. As a result, about 80 percent of my students ended up creating a project with someone else.

I printed out resources to help keep them focused, including:

- [the project assignment](#)
- a [scoring rubric](#) for assessing the project
- a [handout about using Glogster](#) (which was adapted from an online resource created by Kathe Santillo)

KEEPING STUDENTS FOCUSED

The motivation to get onto the computers helped students to focus on the task at hand. Once their rough draft writing was done, they were soon on the Glogster site. And here is the thing that I always look for and value when it comes to using technology: The students teach each other. As one student discovered something intriguing about using Glogster — about how to make their own background, for example — the other students would quickly know how to do the same thing as informal talk filtered through the room.

Students regularly walked around teaching each other, and experiments would soon

be underway. Mostly, I let these things happen naturally, and I can't overstate the value of setting aside enough time for students to "play" with new technology. Exploration should be part of the learning experience. As students discover something new and open the door to new possibilities, the teacher needs to be ready to provide on-the-spot mini-lessons to guide student learning.

Here are some of the lessons and scaffolding I provided with our *Three Cups of Tea* project:

- how to log onto Glogster, change your password and create an username within the walled classroom setting
- how to place text on your "wall" (the background of the poster)
- how to integrate video and images
- how to create an audio podcast and upload the audio file into your wall
- how to make a constructive comment on other students' projects
- how to choose a complementary design (colors, images, etc.) that work in support of your overall idea

Across the curriculum

One day at lunch, my science teacher colleague, the one who worried about the fire chief earlier in the year, turned to me and said, "What's a Glog?"

I laughed. She explained that all of the students were talking about their *Three Cups of Tea* projects and bantering about this "Glog thing." After I gave her a quick overview of what we were doing and what Glogster was, she realized that it might be the perfect platform for students to show their research around engineering design of bridges, which traditionally have been done on paper posters. Since all of our students already had accounts within Glogster (with me as the teacher/administrator), the set-up phase was already done for her. I worked with her a bit on using Glogster by showing her how to make a project and forcing her "play" with a Glog. She found it pretty intuitive once she got started, and within a day or two, the bridge projects were started and underway.

The students' finished bridge projects were then shared out both at our class weblog site, and also at our homework site, which is a regular destination for parents and families.

Around this time, I also noted that some students were working on their own personal Glogs at home, creating posters around favorite bands, hobbies and interests. One student, for example, created an entire Glog around his juggling skills, as he learned how to use his webcam to capture video of himself performing various juggling tricks.

A few students even created posters that reflected learning in other classes — despite the fact that their teachers didn't assign Glog projects. For example, one student made a very interesting Glog about Mesopotamia, which she was learning about in social studies.

Right now, I have a class working on Glogs around an environmental theme as part of our reading of the novel *Flush* by Carl Hiaasen. The students are doing research on issues ranging from endangered species to global warming, and creating an online poster that provides both information and advice for dealing with the issue. As before, my students are very engaged in their work and the use of technology seems to bring out thoughtfulness, spurred on no doubt by the reality that their work is to be shared with a

global audience. They want to impress their readers, wherever they are and whomever they are.

Pitfalls

Our use of digital poster projects has not been without its difficulties. As with much technology, things did not always go perfectly. We run our laptops on a school-wide wireless network hub and there were times when having 20 laptops on the wireless — complete with streaming video into the posters or uploading podcasts — pushed the wireless system to its limit and student work that had not been saved was lost. I am always surprised by how resilient most students are when this happens; I find it incredibly frustrating when they lose anything they have been working on due to a technological glitch. Usually, they just shrug and go back to work.

I had originally intended a podcast book review of *Three Cups of Tea* to be a mandatory part of the project, but this proved difficult. First, the feature to record your voice directly onto the Glog did not seem to work with the wireless computers. Reacting to this, I showed the students how to use the voice recorder in Microsoft XP and move the files up into the Glog. That took time, so I made the podcast an option rather than a mandatory element, and the project still stretched a few days beyond what I had expected.

The most difficult thing for students is learning about the importance of design. (See sidebar.) Visual literacy is an important skill that not taught or explained to young writers often enough. When someone is working on a physical poster, she has to plan the materials and get the materials herself. This makes the process a bit more thoughtful, as you really do start from scratch.

An online site like Glogster has set templates and pretty wild designs to choose from. It's true you can start from a blank white screen, but if you know young people, you know that they're inevitably drawn to flashy templates. While this makes the creation of a poster go quicker and removes some barriers, I find that many students aim for the flashiest background and the most colorful text — thinking, perhaps, about impressing their friends — and don't think about the critical question: *Do the design elements help or hinder the point I am trying to make?*

It's vital that teachers step into this void and talk openly and often about the principles of design (for example, red font on black background does not work). I adhere to a mantra that I almost sing out to my students during these project: *Just because you can do something, that doesn't mean you should do it.* I have found this to be a very difficult learning curve for many students who equate flashiness with quality.

Publish to the world

Glogster gives teachers some layered options for publishing: you can keep work private (only for the student and teacher to see); you can publish it for the walled classroom only; or you can publish it to the world, which really means that a poster gets put into a gallery of work by other students in other walled classrooms within the Glogster space. For the *Three Cups of Tea* project, I wanted something more, so I decided to create a website that featured the completed projects together. I used a webpage creator site called Yola, but other teachers use wiki sites like Wikispaces to publish Glog projects.

Publishing, however, became an incentive for my students. Once they were done with their projects, they had to respond to the feedback I provided through the Glogster messaging system. (In the educational space of Glogster, only teachers and students can message each other. The message option between students is turned off by Glogster.) Students would make editing and proofreading changes to their projects, and then message me to let me know their task was completed. As the projects were finalized, I added them to our *Three Cups of Tea* website. I found this to be a great motivator for many of my students, who truly did want to showcase their work for the world.

Where do we go from here?

I learned a few lessons from my work with students and Glogster. The site reinforced the elements of visual literacy as a component of composition with digital media. The use of video and images and audio make for an interesting mix. I learned that students using a virtual poster site really need scaffolding and focus, and the scaffolding that teachers provide is crucial for quality. I was reminded again and again about how students can surprise you with their work and effort, and that technology can be a strong motivator in the classroom.

So, yes, my young writers, today we will be Glogging. Are you ready?

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