



# TECHNOLOGY

## Ten Ways Google Classroom Can Work for Your Orchestra

by Levi Comstock

A few years ago, Michael Watson and I presented on Google Classroom at the MNSOTA Fall Clinic. Since then, the good people at Google have been hard at work improving the platform, and we have found new ways to put it to use.

In a nutshell, Google Classroom is a kind of private social media platform to which a teacher can invite students and parents. If you have a gmail-based e-mail address, you can set one up for each of your ensembles in about thirty seconds, plus the time it takes to choose a cool backdrop. You can invite students using their e-mail addresses or write a code on the whiteboard and they can join themselves. With your classroom set up, you can send out quick questions, surveys, announcements, and create assignments. Students will receive e-mail notifications about anything you post and can access the site from a computer or through an app on a mobile device.

The functionality is very simple, but once your students get used to it, there are so many ways to use it...

### Take-home playing tests

It is easier than ever to assign and grade performance tests. Post an assignment with the measure numbers, tempo markings, even a picture of the excerpt you want to hear. Students can record themselves on their phone and turn it in. When tests are in, the teacher can scroll through, listening to each one, typing comments, and adding a score. If desired, you can listen to them at up to double speed. In a single hour, it is possible to listen to and grade a class of fifty students playing an eight-measure excerpt. Sometimes I grade at home, and my feedback reaches the student minutes after they submitted it. Often they will read it and resubmit a few minutes later, having

practiced and improved!

### In-class playing tests

When you just want to know who knows their finger patterns and who is artfully faking, have students place their phones on their music stands and play through a passage as a class. Everyone records at the same time and turns it in; you can peruse them later and use the information to differentiate instruction in subsequent rehearsals.

### Music theory

Assign theory drills on MusicTheory.net, Note-flight, Flat.io, or even your own worksheets using Google Forms. Some apps allow students to submit directly, others work best if they take a screenshot of their final score and submit that as a picture.

### Background research

Post recordings of repertoire, links to composer biographies, documentary clips, technique demonstrations, or any other supplemental materials that might get students thinking about content from your class when they are not in your classroom.

### Sectional plan

Each week, I share a lesson plan template with my section leaders. They create their plan for sectionals and I review it, offering ideas about rehearsal strategies. Sometimes I will ask them to post a video of their accomplishments that day.

### Get-to-know you slides

In the first week of school, I share a slideshow with each class and give everyone permission to edit it. Each student creates their own "About Me" slide with a picture, their name, and a few fun facts. We watch the completed slide show in class with some

fun background music, and it stays up so that they have a "picture directory" of their ensemble throughout the year.

### Vote for your favorite

Choosing pieces for a pops concert? Voting on T-Shirt designs? Post a question and Google will tally your results instantly. It can even make fancy graphics.

### What did I miss?

I create my lesson plan on Google Slides. I share the presentation on Google Classroom so that a student who is absent can read the announcements, see the cool video we watched of Edgar Meyer and Bela Fleck, or even practice the rhythm warm-ups on their own time. (Okay, maybe that's a lot to ask, even of an orchestra nerd.)

### Sign the Handbook

Post the handbook; ask the question: "Did you read the handbook and mark the concert dates?" There are two possible answers:

- Yes of course.
- Yes, but I am lying and actually no.

### This one time in orchestra class...

If you trust your class, you can allow students to post and comment to each other. With the right group, it is a good way to build community and memorialize the time that kid hula-hooped while playing the viola.

*Levi Comstock teaches orchestra at Champlin Park High School. He graduated from St. Olaf College in 2008 and received his Masters in Differentiated Instruction from Concordia University in 2018. He spent three years in Boston helping to launch an El Sistema music program at Conservatory Lab Charter School, and now lives in Minneapolis with his wife and two children. ♪*