

# Using Google+ Private Communities for Online Discussions

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## What I did:

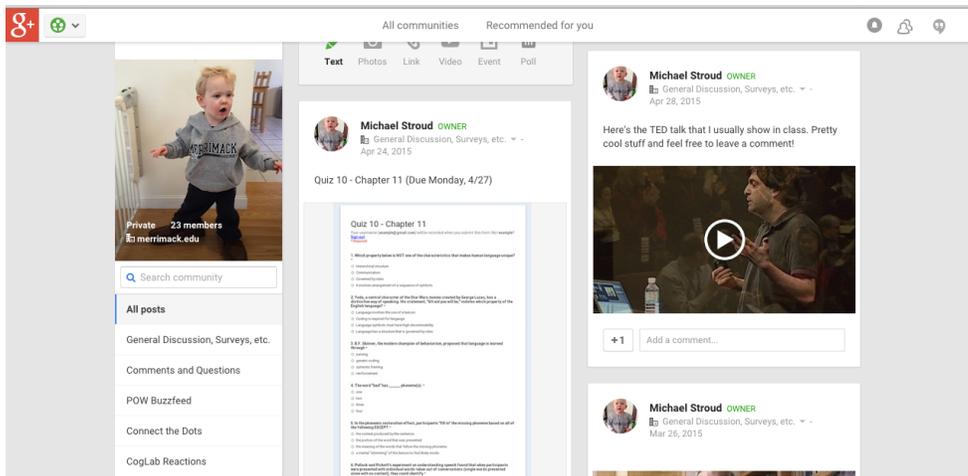
In an effort to increase student engagement outside of the classroom, I sought out a method whereby students could interact with each other (and the instructor) through an intuitive and easy to navigate online system. After exploring many options, I determined that a Google+ Private Community was the best option out there to create a rich, dynamic, online environment.

## Why?

Given that student engagement outside of the class is integral to my teaching, I needed to provide the forum for online interactions. However, Blackboard was very restrictive, confusing to navigate, and one-dimensional.

## The Result:

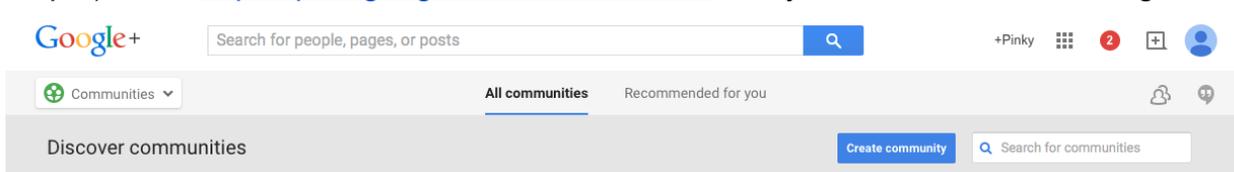
Below is a screenshot of a community from one of my classes. Notice the left sidebar with the separate categories for each component of the course. Each category has a separate corresponding discussion section which is not possible in Blackboard. Further, the community integrates with other Google Apps as well as Youtube for seamless posting of videos. Finally, the posting responses is simple, familiar to students, and fully accessible from the free mobile App.



## Guide to Creating a Google+ Private Community

Step 0) If you have never registered for Google+, you need to complete your profile. Go to <https://plus.google.com/> and enter your birthdate (for age verification, this won't be visible on your public profile). There are other optional aspects of your profile that you will be asked to fill in before you can proceed.

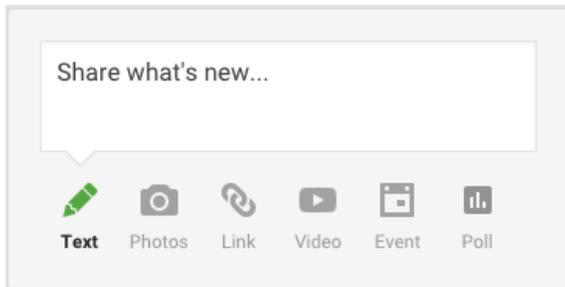
Step 1) Go to <https://plus.google.com/communities> and you should see something that looks like this:



Step 2) Click on 'Create Community' and two options will appear. Choose 'restricted to merrimack.edu' and click next. Click on 'Private in merrimack.edu' and then give your community a name. I typically go with the name of the course and the semester.

Step 3) Customize the course layout. You can insert a photo for the course, but more importantly, you can set up the categories. On the lower left, the default is 'Discussion'. Just click on the word and you can enter whatever you want (Readings, videos, demos, etc.). You will then see 'Add a category' where you can create up to 16 separate categories.

Step 4) Add videos, discussion threads, etc. Click on the specific category and then you can add any material that students can view and/or comment on. Below is the image of the default box. Write in the prompt whatever you want and then you can attach a number of different things.



Step 5) Once the community is ready, you just need to invite your students. As soon as you enter your community, you will see in the upper right corner under 'Spread the Word', 'invite people'. Click on that and a box will appear. Paste in the email addresses of all of your students in the 'To' box and you can add a custom message. If your students have registered for Google+, they will receive an email inviting them to the community. If you are curious to check, click on 'x member' on the course photo and you can see all of the members as well as who has been invited (click on the word 'members' to scroll down to 'invited').