Using Google My Maps for Classroom Projects

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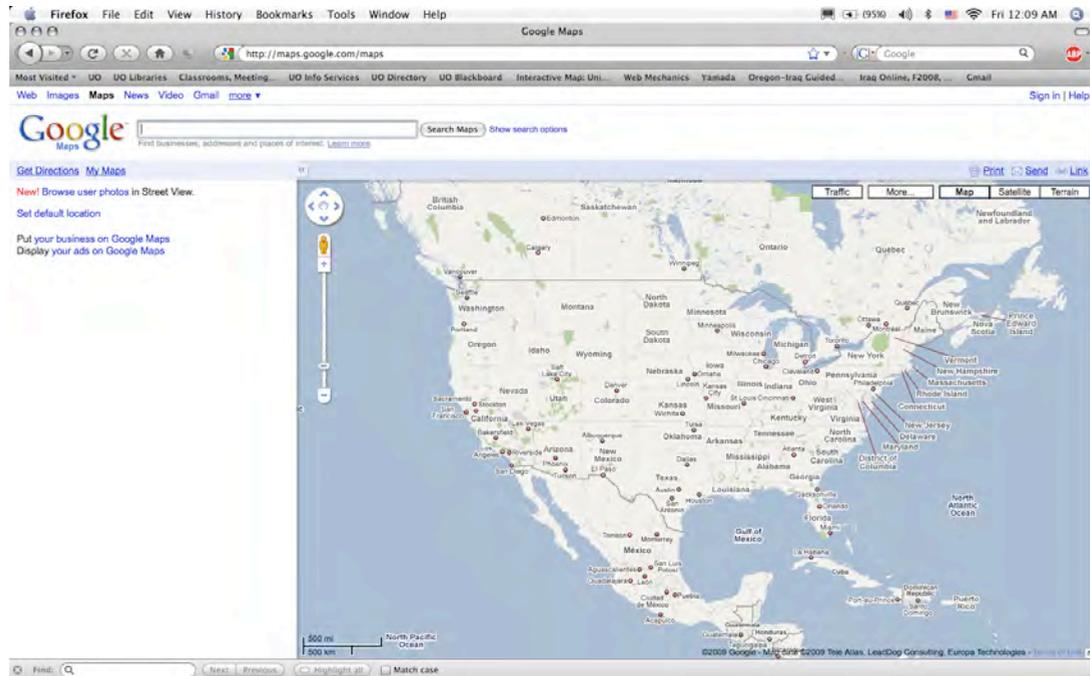

Figure 1. Google Maps basic page, found at http://maps.google.com/.

Introduction

Finding authentic, engaging tasks in the classroom can be a challenge. The constantly shifting landscape of the internet, especially in its web 2.0 incarnation, offers an amazing variety of opportunities for engaging students. At the same time, it can be vast and overwhelming for busy language professionals. How do we keep up with the latest innovations? Which ones have true significance for classroom applications?

One way to narrow this daunting task is to develop a niche and limit ourselves to specific types of applications, such as news reports, blogs or video. Yet another way to further limit the field is to keep pace with free or open source services. Within the world of free applications, Google, best known for its ubiquitous search function, offers a growing number of freely available "tools" or "products." One of these products, Google My Maps, is the focus here.

Google My Maps allows teachers to design highly motivating activities that encourage students to practice reading, writing and speaking skills as well as develop visual literacy, cartographic and technical skills. It appeals to younger students in general and visual learners in particular. It is easily adaptable for project based learning tasks for the entire class, for groups or for individuals. And best of all, it is fun and free.

What is Google my maps?

Google My Maps is a feature of Google Maps. Although it is nearly impossible to believe now, Google Maps began only four years ago, in 2005, when it debuted as a basic, searchable internet map. It was developed to compete with other free map sites such as Map Quest and Yahoo Maps. Gaining immediate popularity, Google Maps quickly added new features and extra services. Some of the more popular additional features added over time include Satellite View, Topographical View, Google Transit, and Google Street View.

My Maps, an additional feature to Google Maps, was added in April 2007, and allows users to create and layer their own maps on top of existing maps. Users can add, edit and store information such as place-markers, lines, shapes, text, photos and video, on top of the regular Google maps at any zoom level. Another valuable feature is the collaborative option, which allows owners of a map to share the actual creation, development, and view options of individual maps with other individuals or groups of people.

These innovations in My Maps have created an array of potential classroom applications. From the most basic use of maps, such as projecting a map in a classroom for students to view as reinforcement to a lesson, to elaborate projects that focus on different language skills or functions, Google Maps and My Maps offers a literal world of opportunity for the creative language teacher. A few possible applications are outlined later in this paper. But first I will introduce the basics of getting started.

Getting started with Google my maps

First, users need to either open a Google account or register a current email address with Google. You can perform some of the basic activities without an account, but only after registering and logging on can users begin to create maps and store work on My Maps.

Preparing your students

Before students create their own maps, both you and your students should be familiar with the map environment. Make sure your students are comfortable navigating the maps with, for example, the click and drag function, the zoom function, and the search function. Have them search for specific places in different ways, such as the drag feature versus the search maps button. Have
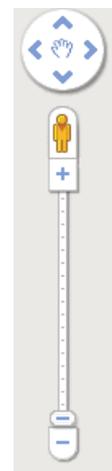
them zoom in for close up looks of a city, and then back out again for wide looks of the earth. Have them try to find their own house using the different views, such as map view first then the satellite view.

Another way to prepare students is to make sure they are familiar with the different screens. Currently there are three screens: the basic map screen, Get Directions screen, and My Maps screen. When you first go to Google Maps you will be on the basic map screen. You can click on the Get Directions or My Maps tab to change the screen. You will need to be on the My Maps screen to create and edit maps of your own, or to access Featured Content (both discussed later under suggested activities).
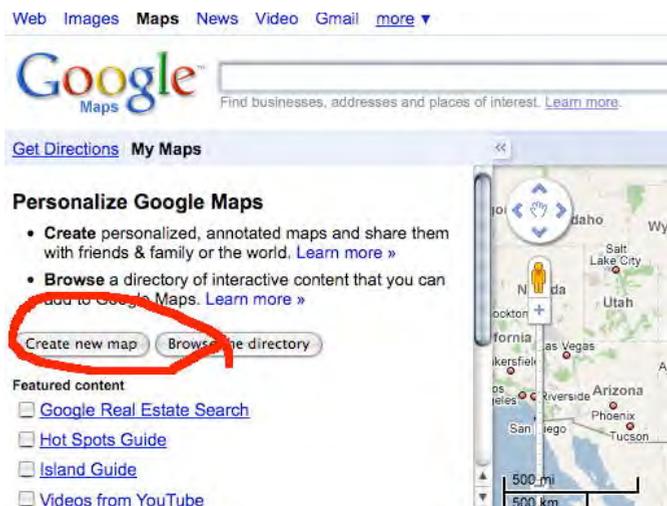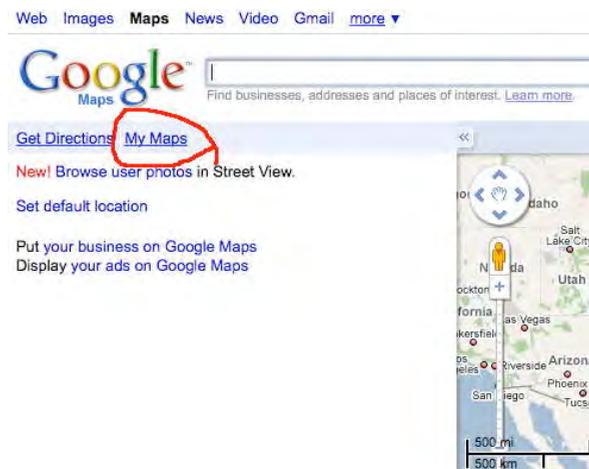
Figures 2a and 2b. The basic map screen (2a) and the My Maps screen (2b). From the basic map screen click on the tab Get Directions or My Maps to change screens. From the My Maps screen you can start to create new maps.

Creating your own map

To get started creating your own maps simply click on "Create new map" from the My Maps page. Once you have created a map, be sure to save every time you make major additions to it, just like any other document you are working on, or you may lose your work. You can create multiple maps for different purposes or for different classes. The maps you create will be listed on the sidebar on the left side of the screen if you are signed in to Google.

Adding content to your map

Once you have created a map you can begin to add content to that map. There are four ways in which you can manipulate and work with your map. The first tool is the selection tool . The selection tool is the primary tool and with it you can grab and drag a map as well as select the other tools. The second tool is the placemarker which allows you to pinpoint locations and items on the map. Another tool allows you to create lines which can be used to show routes, directions or distances. The final tool is used to make shapes . This tool can be used to outline areas you wish to highlight. For most basic map creations in the language class I find the placemarker tool to be the most valuable.

Zoom Features and level of detail

One nice thing about working with digital maps in general and Google My Maps in particular is that you can develop different projects at different levels of detail. For example, you can work on a global level if you have students from many different parts of the globe, a regional or country level if you have students from one country, or even on a street level if you prefer to have students make maps of their home towns or their current residences.

Figure 3a. An example of a very wide global level of detail.
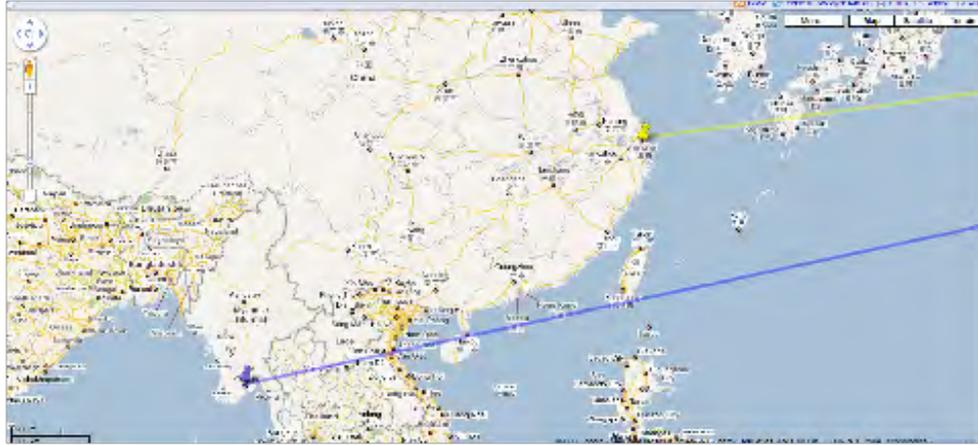
Figure 3b. Example of a regional or country level of detail. The colored lines were added to connect the home cities of the students to their US university.
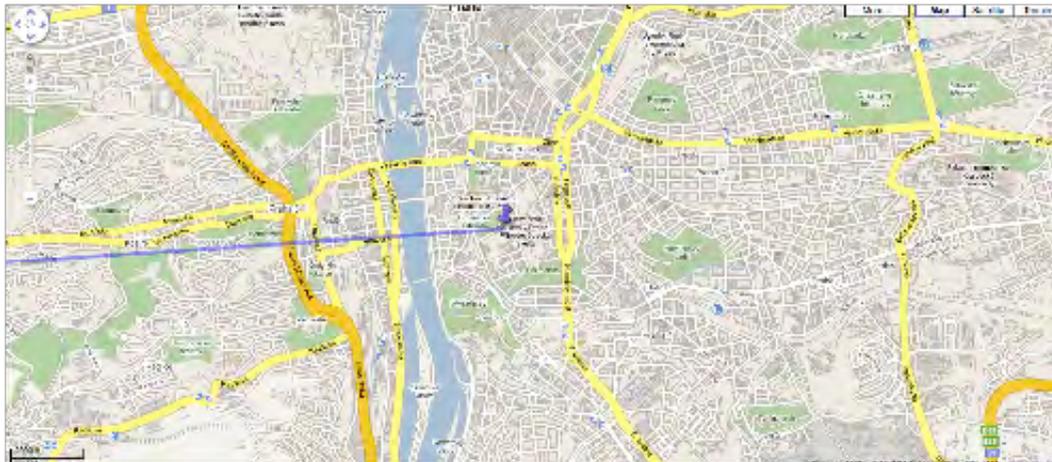
Figure 3c. Example of a city and street level of detail. Here the student has pinpointed his home university in Prague. If you zoom in closer you can even see the location of his department on the campus.

Sharing your map

After your map is complete you can easily share it with others. In the top right corner is a "link" button [Link] . Click it and you can then copy and past the URL or address into a document or email. You can also clink the "send" button [Send] and you can easily send the link to yourself or to others.

Once you and your students feel comfortable with the Google Maps and My Maps environment, you are ready to get started using them in projects in your class.

Suggested activities

Below are a few ideas to get you started, but in fact there are few limits to the number and variety of potential activities. I will start with the easiest ideas technologically, and work towards ones that require higher computer or Google Maps proficiency.

Basic activities

Talk about your home. Start by using preexisting maps for the most basic of activities. Have students point out and talk about their home countries or hometowns on a projected map to the whole class or on an individual computer screen to a partner or small group. This can be done just by going to Google maps, dragging the map to the desired location, and then zooming in. What's the weather in LA? For a simple activity practicing present, past, or future tense or weather terms, click on The Weather Channel under "Featured Content" on the left side of the My Map screen. You will be able to zoom in for regional or local weather forecasts, or zoom out for global ones. Click on overlays to see clouds or storms. Try clicking on the weather callouts for details on the weather.
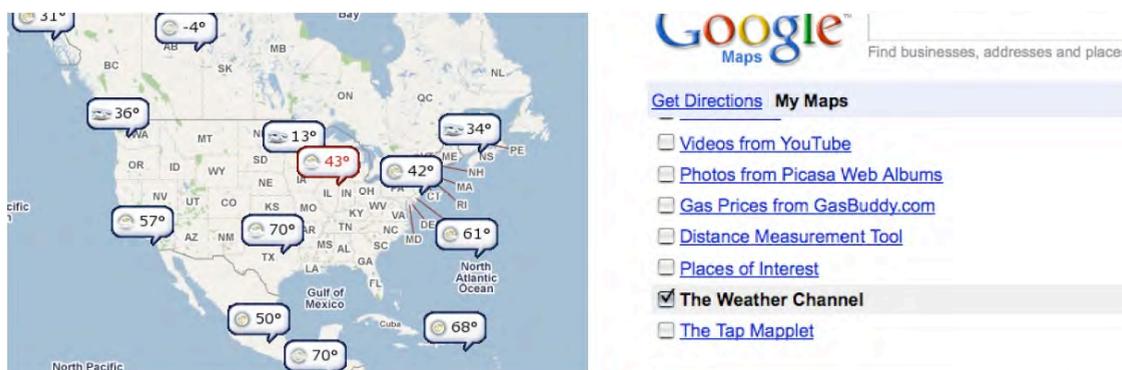
Figure 4. Example of a simple activity using a weather screen from The Weather Channel, one of the pre-existing, Featured Content options.

Find a good restaurant. Another simple activity that takes advantage of the Featured Content is to have students search the "Places of Interest" feature. You can search for ATMs, grocery stores, hospitals or dining, among other things. The dining feature is particularly rich in options. You can have students search for Mexican restaurants, for example, asking them to read the reviews and choose one that sounds best. If possible, have the class visit the restaurant. As a variation, you may even have your intermediate or advanced students post a review.
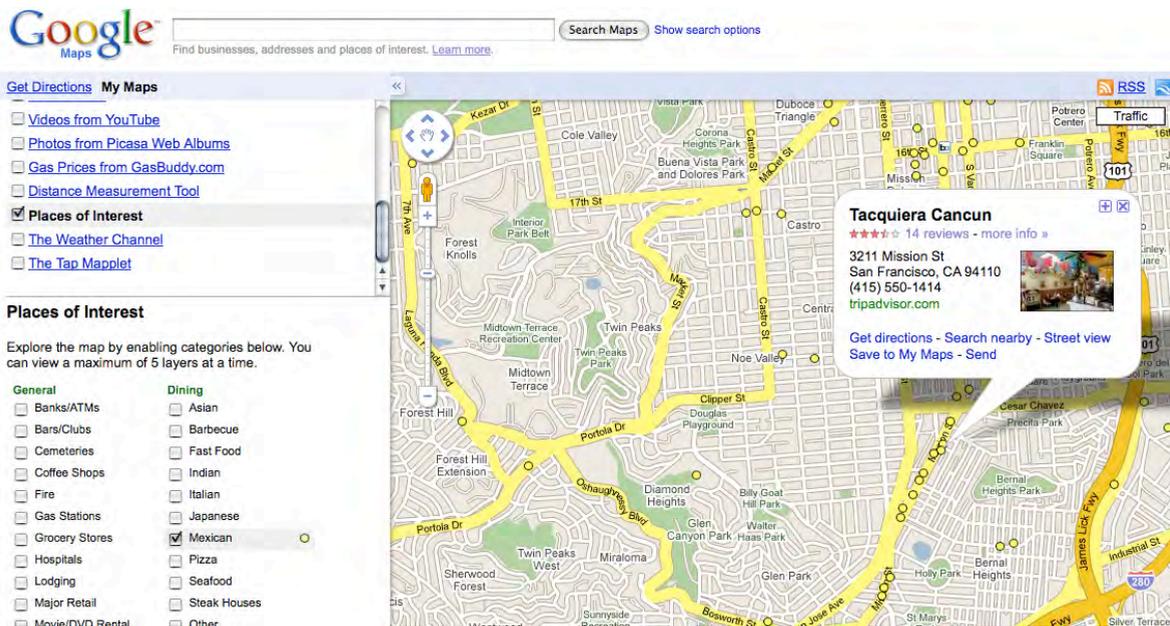
Figure 5. You can use the Places of Interest choice under Featured content for many simple activities, such as searching for restaurants or writing reviews.

Where is your hometown? Slightly more difficult, you can ask students to create a collaborative map as a class project. Start with a basic function like adding placemarkers. To begin this project make sure you are on the My Maps screen. First create a map and name it. At this point you can choose to make the map "public" so that anyone searching Google Maps could find this map, or "unlisted" for privacy, requiring you to give the URL or address to those you wish to see it.

Another consideration at this point is the collaboration status of the map. You may choose to allow anyone to edit, which is simplest for getting your students up and editing that same map. For a more "controlled" option you can invite specific people to edit the map. The advantage with this option is not only can you can limit who works on this map, but also those you invite have the map appear automatically on their My Maps screen after they log in to Google.
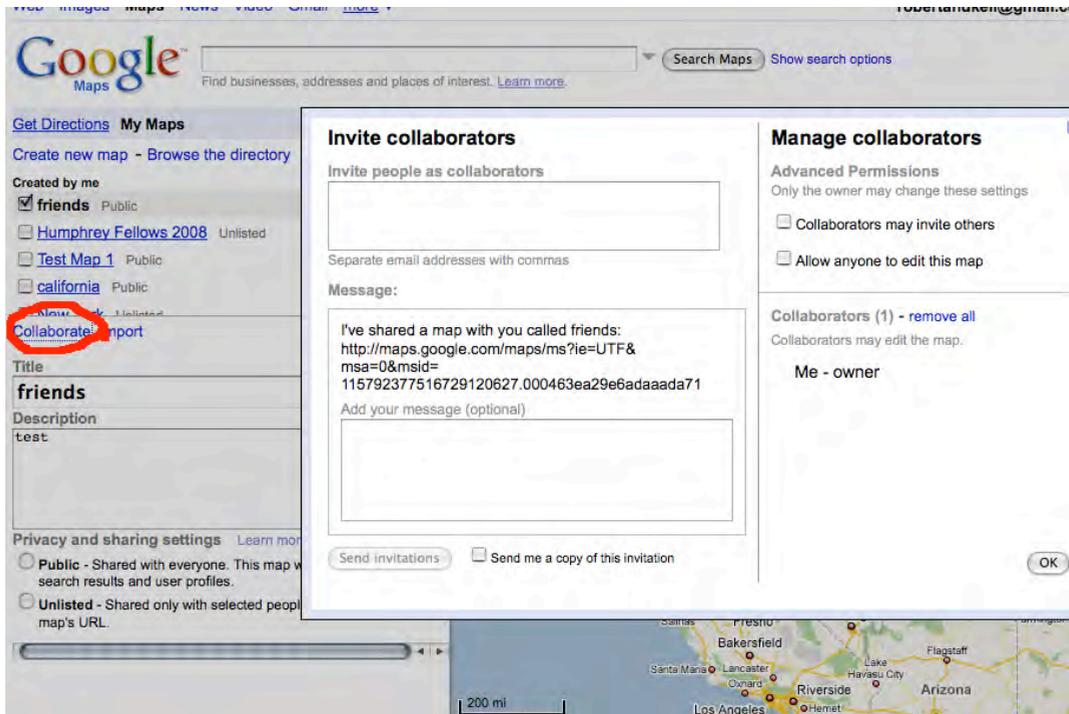
Figure 6. Click on the "collaborate" button to get a pop up window that allows you to invite specific people to work on that map.

After you have tweaked the settings the way you want, turn the class loose. Have them drop placemarkers on their hometowns. To do this activity, make sure your students are on the My Maps screen, click on the map they wish to work on, then click "edit." You will then see the placemarkers tool along with the other tools near the top. Placemarkers can then be selected and dropped anywhere you like, from world map level to local city level. Have students put their name in for the title, and for intermediate students or above you can have them write briefly or at length about their homes or other topics.
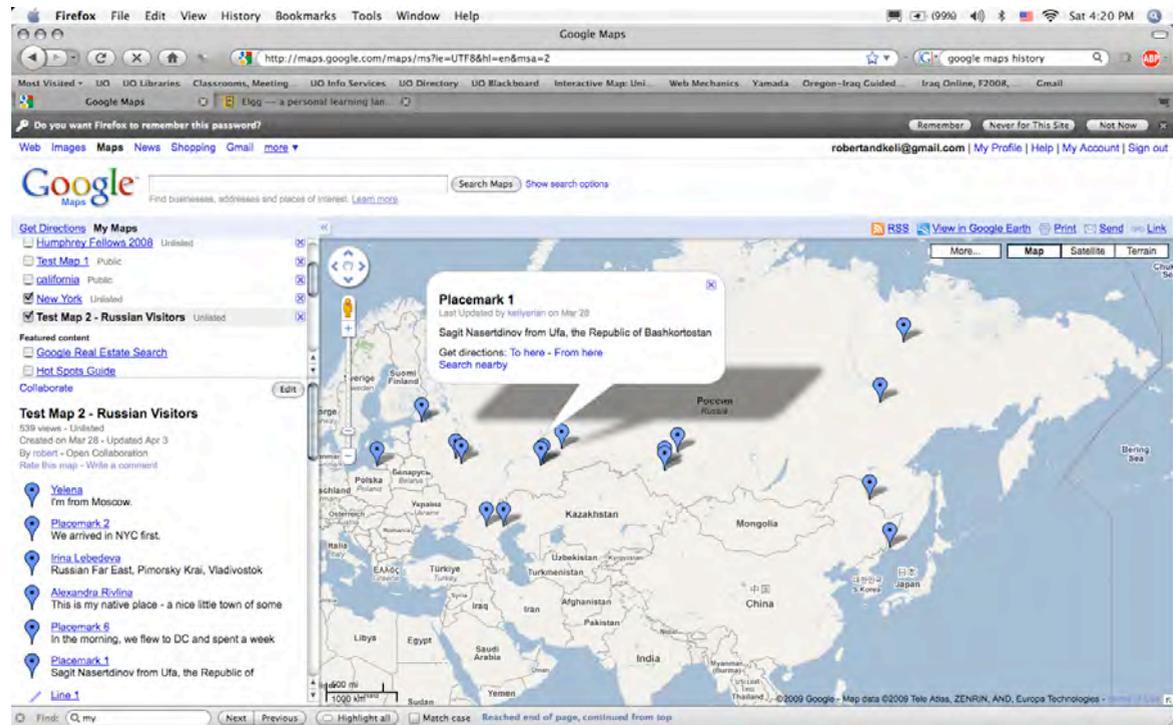
Figure 7. A basic map showing "hometowns" of a group of Russian visitors to our university. The participants have added placemarkers and are now beginning to add text.

Advanced activities

Directions to my house. In this activity you can take advantage of the line tool by having students draw a line from one place to another, such as from school to their home. To do this activity, make sure you are on the My Maps screen, click on the map you wish to work on, then click "edit." You will see the line tool along with the other tools near the top. Students can then add lines between places on the map.

As a writing activity, have students practice writing the directions in the text box. From the edit mode, click on the line to get a textbox to which you can add text. If you do this as a collaborative classroom project and there are many lines on the same map, you can even change the colors of the lines for different students for easier readability. Again, from the edit mode, click on the line so you get an editable pop-up bubble. Once that window is open, change colors of the line by finding the box that has a line in it. Click it and select from the many available colors.
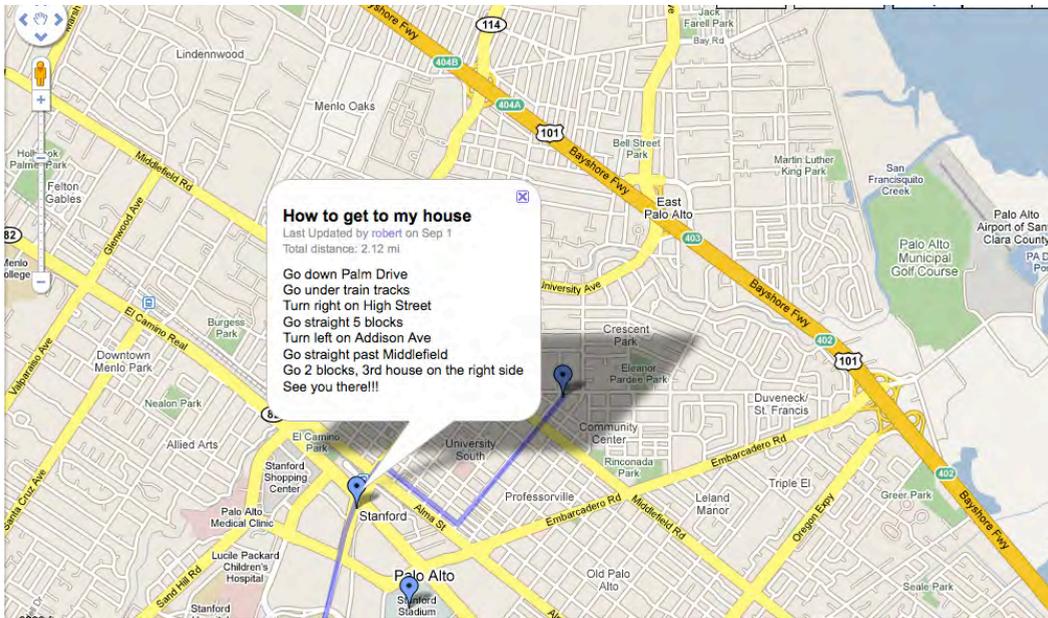
Figure 8. Here a map maker has drawn a line from her office to her home. Directions have been added to the line in the pop-up bubble.

Describe your day. This activity is best done as an individual project. Students can put placemarkers onto a local map that show major stops in their daily routine. Have students begin by creating a new map. Then starting with their home, they can add placemarkers and text describing where their stops were and what they did at those places. After the placemarkers have been added, you can have them draw lines to connect the places. For a collaborative oriented variation, have a group of students plan a trip, adding placemarkers and lines to the stops along the way and adding text about why they want to visit each place or what they will do there.
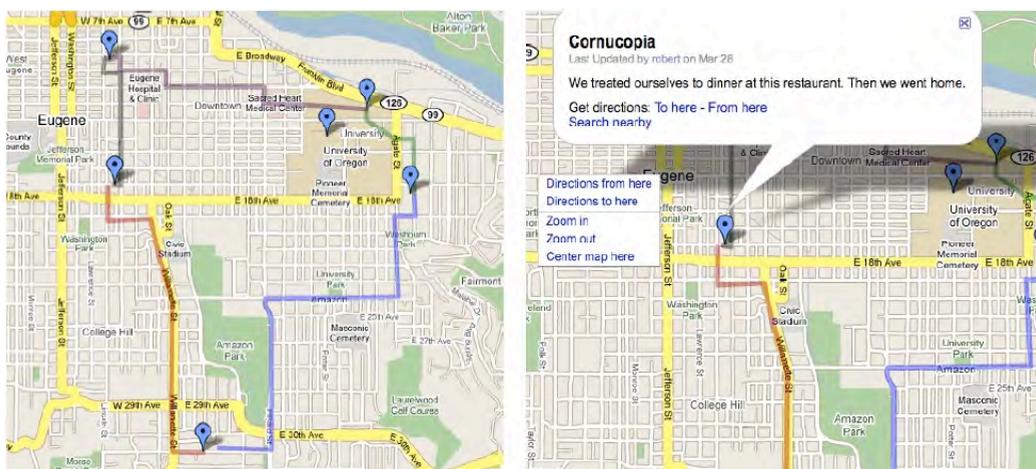
Figs 9a and 9b. A basic map showing the stops along a day. 9b shows text added to the placemarker.

My favorite place on campus. This is the most complex project described here, but also my favorite. Beyond text addition, users of Google maps can add pictures, audio and even video into their maps. Many of the text-based activities you can come up with are easily adaptable to speaking. The basic trick is to use the rich text (for pictures or links for example) or the edit html options (for embedding video or audio posted on YouTube or Google video) in the editable pop-up bubble.

To do this project, first create a collaborative class map. Have students select a favorite place and think about why they like this place. After practicing what they will say, have students go to that place (if possible) in pairs or small groups and film themselves talking about it. If you have access to a set of video cameras, such as the inexpensive flip cameras, this can facilitate the filming process tremendously. After filming, the video will need to be uploaded to a video host, such as YouTube or Google video.

Once the video is uploaded and viewable, you want to find the "embed" area on the video host. This is the link that is written in html. You want to copy and paste this into the Google My Maps edit html option for each corresponding placemarker. A little tricky at first, but the results are great, and it gets easier. Students have loved this project.

Figures 10a and 10b. In this project, students created a map of their favorite spots on campus (10a). Video was added to each placemarker so the students could give an oral narration "on the spot" of why they liked each place (10b).

This project developed from a former in-class impromptu speech activity in which one goal was to practice using transitional phrases in formal presentations. By switching to the My Maps project instead, students were able to practice the same rhetorical elements in a more creative and inspiring way. They broadened their sense of audience and felt more compelled to perform well in their spoken English and presentation skills.

Limitations and final thoughts

Clearly Google My Maps is not suitable for all classroom situations. For schools or classrooms with no access to computers or internet it is simply not an option. For those with limited computer access or low bandwidth, the more complex projects may not be worth the effort. For the video project, a video camera is necessary and a class set of inexpensive cameras is desirable. As technology access increases and video cameras become cheaper or even standard on cell phones, these logistical barriers to succeeding in even the most challenging project described above will fall.

The learning curve for the teacher is another concern. Admittedly the final video project was time consuming and challenged my technological capabilities the first time I did it. Much of the burden for uploading files shifted to me because of in class time constraints and the fact that students had no idea how to do it. I found at that time I was ahead of the curve. But now, less than two years after starting to use Google Maps in my classes, I am finding many students are now more YouTube savvy and

Google Maps knowledgeable than me. The digital natives are coming, and they will arrive with less resistance to technology and a willingness to embrace these types of projects. My prediction is that they will even come to expect them.

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