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Action, Connection, Communication: The Honors Classroom in the Digital Age

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For more than a decade, the two of us, an historian and a literature professor, have co-taught a 12-credit European Civilization sequence for first-year honors students. Last year Grand Valley inaugurated an impressive new living and learning center, which includes two innovative classrooms dubbed “Learn Labs,” Steelcase’s effort to bring twenty-first century design to traditional classrooms that may have met the needs of the nineteenth century but have lingered long beyond their usefulness. In the Learn Lab, five conference tables, arranged in a star shape, supplant regimented rows of desks. At the head of each table, pillars provide electrical and projector connections. Three large screens placed around the room can project a monitor from anyone’s laptop or from the instructor’s station tucked in a corner. We can walk around the room and still operate the interactive “Walk and Talk” board. Document cameras allow us to save the day’s work by recording marker-board scribbles or individual documents.

The Learn Labs’ impressive array of technology and design symbolize well the promise of the digital age along with its challenges. As the philosopher and mathematician Seymour Papert argues, merely adopting technology into old models of education is akin to strapping a new, powerful jet engine to the horse and buggy and then expecting great accomplishments. The Learn Lab provides an environment where we can easily dispense with old educational models as we implement three main principles that guide honors education in the digital age: learning should be active, connected, and communicated.

ACTIVE LEARNING

One of the hallmarks of honors education is course work that challenges students to engage materials and methods directly and substantively; many new technologies make this more possible today. As Professor Mariz notes,

newer electronic tools for researchers provide unprecedented access. Just a few years ago we would need a trip to a scholarly archive to see unique primary documents that can now be in the hands of undergraduates with a mouse click. When we build assignments leading to these sources, students experience the thrill of scholarly exploration and discovery. To introduce the Victorian era, we distribute contemporary artifacts—toys, images, announcements of events, accounts of accidents or notable inventions, prints or articles, some satirical, others serious, from nineteenth-century publications—sending students to find information and situate the artifacts in their historical context. Electronic resources—sites such as the **Victorian Web**; digital archives of magazines like **Punch** or **Godey’s Ladies Book**; accounts in historical newspapers—are invaluable as students construct proposals for an exhibition on Victorian England and present their discoveries to the class.

In the classroom, new web technologies help students discover for themselves what we might in decades past have described for them. For instance, a site called **Wordle** lets users input a text, and with the click of a button a “word cloud” emerges which renders the passage visually with the more frequently used words represented by bolder and larger fonts. **Wordle** is a useful starting point for discussing tone, style, or symbolic patterns in poetry or prose. A computer coding program called **Scratch** allows students easily to create multimedia animations and games. Developed at MIT to teach younger students about object-oriented coding, the free online program works well as an “illustration tool.” Within an hour, our students worked in teams to create impressive illustrations of assigned scenes from Isak Dineson’s **Out of Africa**. In the process of grappling with the novel and the historical context in order to create their multimedia animations, the students learned much more than if we had just discussed the scenes or lectured about them.

As we teach writing, we use a free online program called **Calibrated Peer Review (CPR)** for draft workshops. Students apply evaluation criteria to writing samples we created. Once proficient enough at evaluating those samples, students then critique their peers’ work using the same criteria. Upon completion, CPR provides writers with comments on their own papers from three peers as well as a “grade” of their own performance critiquing others’ work, comparing their assessments to those of the others who evaluated the same papers. A student can discover if she or he is an outlier as an evaluator; in addition, instructors can watch over the whole process from their own computers and intercede with help at any time.

CONNECTED LEARNING

In many ways, the activities we have already described also embody connectedness. Students need to be proficient at working with others; their

professions require this skill, and our society needs it. We model this teamwork ourselves when we talk about our own communities of scholars, showing what scholars have accomplished together. Not only do we help our students build connections to the past and to each other, but we also help them forge connections between their own passions and the past. For example, our semester-long project this fall is an assignment we call “the avatar project,” a name we selected for its evocation of computer avatars, alternative identities that users create for electronic games and sites like Second Life. Each student receives an individual assignment, one tailored to his or her interests and career aspirations. A pre-med major might become a barber-surgeon in the seventeenth century and a physician in the nineteenth; a nursing major might become an eighteenth-century midwife and an associate of Florence Nightingale in the nineteenth century; an art major, an advisor to Louis XIV in his quest to design and decorate Versailles and then an early impressionist in the nineteenth century. Students create a persona for each of their essays, situating their avatar in an accurate historical milieu. When students can see the connections between the past and their own passions, they value history.

COMMUNICATED LEARNING

When we were students, we typed papers and submitted them to our professors for grades. Perhaps one or two of our peers exchanged papers with us for “proofreading,” but by and large we did not see the work of the rest of the class, nor did we imagine a wider audience for our writing. Technological tools now make possible a grand electronic “show and tell,” further reinforcing both active and connected learning. Our Learn Lab design means that we can accomplish a task in class or for homework and then project the work for the class to see and discuss. We have also encouraged students to envision a deeper purpose and wider audience for their work by creating websites. For example, an honors junior-seminar website on “Hemingway in Michigan” features primary documents, tour videos, and the performance of a song written by Hemingway’s mother about their cottage, “Lovely Walloona” (1901). What the students have created provides new material for both Hemingway fans and experts.

Students who put their work out for a wider audience sometimes have stunning consequences. One of our students in European Civilization decided to learn more about her grandfather’s experience as an Army Air Force gunner in World War II. She knew he had been shot down over Austria and spent time as a prisoner of war, but not much more. Military records told her about the reconnaissance missions her grandfather had flown and the fate of his final flight. She created a website to tell her grandfather’s story, and she connected with the one surviving crew member of the doomed flight and, to

her amazement, the Austrian farmer who had found the downed airmen in 1944. The electronic age made those connections possible!

Technologies will continue to emerge and to disappear. Many students are already abandoning Facebook and Twitter because we old codgers have taken it up. In fact, the 60s motto of “don’t trust anyone over thirty” may for this generation become, “don’t trust any technology used by anyone over thirty.” We do not need to rush to embrace every latest technology. We just need to take our own advice to be lifelong learners because, when we know what possibilities are out there, we can harness the technology that works best to promote our goal of providing high-quality education to honors students. If we do that, we will create extraordinary classrooms where action, connection, and communication rule!”

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