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2009

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Doherty, John J. and Ketchner, Kevin, "Making Connections: Technology and Interaction in an Honors Classroom" (2009). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 500.
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Making Connections: Technology and Interaction in an Honors Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

The adoption of educational technology tends to be based on the technology itself as opposed to the pedagogical needs it can serve—what we like to think of as a solution in search of a problem. In this paper we contend that appropriate application of educational technology to produce certain face-to-face outcomes in a composition seminar can improve the student experience in the course. We frame our discussion in Mishra’s and Koehler’s TPACK theoretical framework (2006), where the quality teacher becomes the content expert who knows *what* to teach and *how* to teach to the novice learner while also understanding *how* a non-pedagogical technology can facilitate learning. Our discussion shows how we used online discussion to build a community of learners in a busy first-year honors seminar.

THE PROBLEM

We teach first-year honors courses that fulfill the university writing requirement. One of the program-level requirements is that instructors choose texts and films that cover a broad chronological range in order to give students an historical context for the reading materials, to make connections between past and present, and to suggest the thematic, conceptual, literary, historical, cultural, and philosophical roots of their reading materials. Essential to success in this course and any honors course is student-instructor interaction. Garrison and Anderson note that technology can support and enhance even traditional interactions such as the lecture. For example, educational technology can help instructors sign off on high-impact interactions so that they can focus their time and instruction in ways that more effectively use their time. Technology also can take us back to the future, to a learning theory framed on communities of inquiry or, as Garrison and Anderson note, a “community where individual experiences and ideas are recognized and discussed in light of societal knowledge, norms, and values” (4).

Such a community is difficult to create. One of the goals of our honors program is to explore the opportunities presented by a liberal education, especially in the light of William Cronon's humanistic definition of liberal education as a place for students to begin making connections among themselves and with their texts. Such connections necessitate a classroom of trusting students—not, in and of itself, a specified learning outcome but nevertheless essential to successful learning in our honors courses. The dilemma we faced in designing our course was how to meet the intrinsic need for community and connection without unduly sacrificing the programmatic outcomes in the process.

A (NOT THE ONLY) SOLUTION

We have tried a variety of ways to build communities and connections. Our university made the decision to deliver all electronic readings through our course management system (initially WebCT Vista, then Blackboard Vista) a few years ago, thus necessitating that all courses have a Vista shell each time they are delivered. In other words, even though we taught in-person, face-to-face classes, we still needed to have our students access Vista in order to get some of the supplemental readings. We saw this necessity as an opportunity to rethink our pedagogy by re-tasking some face-to-face activities to Vista, enhancing the quality of face-to-face interaction in class, and giving more time to focus on required learning outcomes.

One strategy we employed was introductory icebreakers, which are important to the establishment of a learning community and climate (Knowles). We encountered a problem with icebreakers, however: students are resistant when they are experiencing them for the umpteenth time. We also wondered if icebreakers need to happen in, and only in, the first class. A community cannot form in one day, never mind one 50- or 75-minute class.

Technology, however, can help here. We adapted an icebreaker described by Conrad and Donaldson and moved it to Blackboard Vista. Following some brief peer-led introductions during our first live meeting, we assigned students a Name That Movie activity in a Vista-based discussion. The assignment was as follows:

By the end of Wednesday, August 26th:

Post a 2–3 sentence discussion response to the following: If you were to write the score to the movie of your life, which two songs would you pick and why? Please pick one song that represents your life as a whole and another that gives a more recent picture.

By the end of Sunday, August 31st:

Based on the answers to 1 above, suggest a movie title for each person, followed by a one sentence explanation of why you chose that title. Do this by responding to their initial posts.

By the beginning of class, Tuesday, September 2nd:

Consider all the suggested titles for your movie (by reading all of your responses). Select the one title that would best fit your movie and note it in your discussion thread, followed by a 1–2 sentence explanation of why you chose it. Also, bring this response to class.

This assignment was not graded, but it promoted phenomenal interactions. It generated 307 messages in one class of 18 students over the course of the five days between our Thursday and Tuesday meetings. Our only adaptation to this activity was to have the students come to class to discuss their final responses. Walking into the Tuesday class after this activity was a different experience from the week before; the room was noisy as students visited with their neighbors and discussed their movie titles and music tastes. Students were referring to each other by name and moving about the room to share movies, songs, and ideas with each other. Connections had been made, and a community was forming.

CONCLUSION

Adoption of technology needs to be a purposeful endeavor. In our example, we identified the need to build community and sought out some solutions with the available technology. The success of such uses of educational technology in honors or any other courses shows up both in classroom performance and end-of-semester assessment. Educational technology can support student learning by allowing us to meet the needs of a large seminar class without compromising our pedagogy and by allowing the instructor to focus on one-to-one interactions with and among students at all levels of academic ability.

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