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Using Technology to Open Storytelling Doors

By Walt Jacobs

In a University of Minnesota College of Liberal Arts online spotlight on teaching, I'm deemed to be "The Open-Door Storyteller." The article notes: "One of Jacobs' goals is to teach his students media literacy—analyzing critically what they read, hear, and see—without reducing their enjoyment of the media. He encourages his students to learn how to tell their own stories as a way of influencing how the media in turn portrays them." Technology has been a key part of this process ever since I first stepped into the classroom as an instructor in my third year of graduate school, in 1995. I'll still be using technology in the classroom when I retire, around 2035 . . .

In my first class—Sociology S335 "Race and Ethnic Relations"—I used a desktop client course management system from AltaVista. Most students accessed the system from campus computer labs instead of downloading the software to their computers. Each week, students answered a question I posted in the "Debate House," using course concepts and engaging the responses of others. (Each student had to answer the question, use a course concept in the answer, summarize another student's answer, and discuss why he or she agreed or disagreed with the other student; the first student to respond had to include only the first two components.) Students also posted five items (in five different weeks) in the "Coffee House." Whereas students had

a standard format in the Debate House, they could do whatever they wanted in the Coffee House, as long as topics were related to the course in some way. I've found that using the Debate and Coffee Houses creates a great idea-sharing venue for students, especially those who are uncomfortable sharing their ideas in front of large groups. Indeed, some

of the shy students who rarely speak in class share the most eloquent analyses in the "Electronic Classroom" (EC), and some become more outspoken in class after receiving affirmation from their peers online.

I retained the EC as I've migrated over the years to web-based course management systems (AltaVista for the web at Indiana University; WebCT/WebVista and Moodle at the University of Minnesota). The technology I've used in face-to-face class sessions has also evolved, of course: from the VHS tapes and CDs of the 1990s to the YouTube videos and MP3s of today. In my classes we start with texts that I select, but I also encourage students to bring in their own material to discuss. For example, one of the best discussions we had in a 2007 freshman seminar on black TV comedians was about an episode of *The Cosby Show* se-



lected by a student. Students very much appreciate opportunities to be teachers who can influence the learning of others; it's now easy for them to bring in a DVD or URL to do this. I'll additionally note that the 2007 freshman seminar class became very engaged when I joined Facebook—after I had asked the students to explain and compare social networking systems for me. Students' expertise in technology can be productively affirmed in small ways like this.

Throughout most of my career I've used course management systems and in-class technology to help students become more critical consumers of the media. My new focus is on how students can also become powerful producers of media content. I recently published an article and digital story on "digital storytelling" in the online journal *Seminar.net* (<http://www.seminar.net/index.php/home/75-current-issue/145-the-pedagogy-of-digital-storytelling-in-the-college-classroom>). The article focuses on how undergraduate students can be taught to make online videos that employ still and moving images, voice-over narration, and music to explore a variety of issues that are important to them. Perhaps even more powerfully, students who learn to make digital stories for class credit go on to use them in other situations. My former students have made digital stories as birthday presents for their parents, have become teaching assistants in other digital storytelling classes, have created digital stories to satisfy requirements in traditional courses, and have produced digital stories about their study-abroad experiences. And those were students who entered my class with no previous video-production experience! Students who did have prior production experience reported that specific training in digital storytelling deepened their ability to dive into the nuances of experiences they wanted to share in other media production formats.

In all of my classes, technology has been crucial in repurposing the classroom: the EC helps students make valu-

able contributions outside of the physical classroom environment; inside the classroom, media technologies help me and the students expand our community to allow for a wider range of learning opportunities. I've used various technologies in the fifteen years I've devoted to this effort, and I can hardly wait to see what's next!



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