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RED ROCKS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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In the spring of 2001, an Introduction to Literature course was integrated with a Western Civilization II course, creating an honors learning community taught by two full-time Red Rocks Community College instructors. Of the eighteen students enrolled, approximately half were in the honors program. The hybrid course met twice a week for 2 ½ classroom hours total (the typical hours for a traditional class); other course work was completed online.

The hybrid learning community presented a wonderful opportunity to utilize technology to enhance this unusual learning environment. The strength of the community turned out to be online discussions using WebCT, an online course delivery system. Student participation was extremely high, with over 50% of the class registering over 1,000 posts each. More important than quantity was the quality of discourse. Students embraced online anonymity to dialectically discuss controversial topics with deeper levels of analysis than found in traditional classroom discussions. Additionally, students broke out of old cliques and formed new online intellectual frie friendships.

Beyond branching into new groups and forging new alliances, communication levels transcended the typically short answers of the classroom environment. Smart responses, critical thinking, questioning, and integrating the learning environments characterized the online discussion area. Strong class communication is illustrated through the following assignment:

Please read Blake's verse "Mock on Mock on Voltaire Rousseau." Blake is attacking the Enlightenment and could be seen as representing Romanticism of the 19th century. In verse or in modern English short answer form, respond as if you were Rousseau or Voltaire defending against Blake's blistering attack.

Students leapt to the challenge and exceeded the instructors' expectations with thoughtful responses including:

mock on...mock on? be still, i say blake, you are a bore for you would exalt the very superstition you do scorn take stand, say i and use reason in all you think and do not expect an Unseen Eye to keep watch over you ~Voltaire

Regardless of the question's complexity, students discovered connections between literature and history, responding thoughtfully and articulately in ways not always present in the in-class discussions.

Not only did student responses lend themselves to meaningful discourse; students also used technology to take over the learning environment. Questions and answers were no longer consistently directed toward the instructors; students often spoke directly to each other, pushing classmates to critically examine topics. Student online postings asked others to explain, clarify, and reply to specific inquiry.

Technology use in education is a contingent proposition. Its successful implementation depends upon the instructors, the students, and the course content. In our

case study, online discussions greatly enhanced the honors learning community and were, in turn, greatly enhanced by the quality of the learning environment.

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