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# Building a Better Honors Learning Community through Technology

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During the first week of classes this semester, I showed a YouTube video to my professional development classes for honors freshmen. “A vision of students today,” created by Michael Wesch (2007) and his Introduction to Cultural Anthropology class at Kansas State University, depicts a realistic yet frustrating view of the learning taking place (or in this case, not taking place) in the college classroom. Students sitting in a large lecture hall bemoan the purchase of expensive but “useless” textbooks and the fact that only 18% of their professors actually know their names. One student claims that, while she will only read eight books this year, she’ll read 2300 web pages and 1281 Facebook profiles. Another student notes that she will write 42 pages for classes this semester and 500 pages of emails. Finally, a student notes that he spends 3½ hours per day online while another says she spends most of her class time on Facebook.

Although almost all of my students had just started their first week of college classes, I saw heads nodding in agreement with the scenario presented in the video. I asked about their classroom experiences thus far; almost all my students have a class with at least a hundred students, and a third to a half of them have at least one online class. One student questioned how she could get a grade for participation in one of her classes when the professor explicitly stated that she would not be learning their names. Many of the students had noticed their peers Facebook-ing or working on other assignments in class instead of paying attention to the lecture.

George Mariz, in “Honors in the Electronic Age,” notes the differences between the honors classroom and the non-honors classroom, the honors student and the non-honors student. I had presented the YouTube video to my students in the first week not only to spark discussion about their classroom experiences thus far but also to note some of the differences between their honors and non-honors classes. With most of our honors classes limited to 25 students or less, I explained to my class that their honors professors most

assuredly would know their names, that readings and assignments would be purposeful, and that Facebook-ing in class would not be an option.

I have been incorporating technology into my honors courses ever since I started working with our honors program in 2005. I coordinate the professional development course for honors freshmen, which introduces students to academic and leadership opportunities outside of the classroom. Since our class only meets once a week for fifty minutes, it can be difficult to establish a sense of community among our twenty-five students. I started using blogs in 2005 as a way for students to initiate or to continue discussions with each other outside of the classroom.

During the spring semester of 2008, I began using an electronic platform for students to submit class assignments. Looking for a way to make our course as paperless as possible, I quickly found that, while it did take a substantial amount of time at the beginning of the semester to set up the course on Blackboard, the amount of time saved later in the semester was well worth it. Students could submit assignments online as soon as they were ready instead of having to wait until the day they were due. Likewise, I could grade assignments as soon as I received them instead of waiting to grade everything all at once. The Blackboard site helped the students keep track of assignments and grades, and it helped me as the instructor to do the same.

As I continue to refine the professional development course, I constantly stay in tune with emerging technologies and how they might be used to create a more dynamic learning experience. In previous semesters my students have been required to partner up to explore one aspect of the local community together, whether it be a restaurant or cultural attraction. The students have then written a review of the location and submitted it on the Blackboard site. While the students would present their location to the class, only the instructor received the review paper. The purpose of the assignment was to help the students get to know their home for the next four years. How could they do that if I was the only person to receive the review?

Now students are building a class wiki site for all of their explorations. Each pair of students gets a page to upload pictures, link to the local attraction on Google maps, include external reviews of the site from the local newspaper or dining guides, and then post their review of the location. Students also are required to use the comment section on each wiki page to comment on other pairs' pages, asking for more information about the site visit or posting their own site review.

For another assignment, students are required to submit drafts of their resumé for refinement in class. The transition from the high school resumé to the college version can be confusing and challenging for many students. To help our students better visualize how they are presenting themselves in

their resumé, I have asked them to paste the text of their drafts into a word cloud developer such as Wordle. Word clouds demonstrate the frequency of words used in text, with the more frequently appearing words displayed as larger in the cloud. After creating their resumé word clouds, students can get quick feedback on the main focus of their resúmes from the instructor and their peers.

These few examples demonstrate how we have incorporated technology into the honors classroom without compromising the integrity of that experience. It could be easy to dismiss technology in the classroom as another avenue for cheating or as a distraction as in the case of the Facebook-ers in the video. On the other hand, it could be just as easy to consider technology as a tool for building a better learning community, one in which students can feel connected and engaged . . . just the intention of our honors courses.

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For the uninitiated, here is some more information about the (free!) technology sites mentioned in the essay.

## BLOGS

Blogger.com and WordPress.com are two excellent blogging sites. Blogger is hosted by Google and is the first blogging site I ever used. The interface was simple and easy to use. My students introduced me to WordPress a few years ago, and I liked the format of their blogs better. With both sites, the TA and I would post discussion questions, class announcements, and pictures from class assignments. Students could use the comment feature to respond to each of those postings.

## EXAMPLES

- Blogger: <<http://honorsfyf94.blogspot.com>> (honors class blog from fall 2005)
- WordPress: <<http://professionaldevelopmentwithkelvin.wordpress.com>> (honors class blog from fall 2007)

## WIKIS

Fall 2009 is my first teaching experience with wikis. I have found that PBWorks.com is an easy-to-use site for new wiki builders. Just as with the blogging software, you create content on the wikis just as though you are developing a Microsoft Word document. No special knowledge of HTML or other Web-speak is needed. With wikis, the focus is on building a collaborative workspace, and students should have opportunities to contribute to the

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content of the space, not just respond to postings. As the coordinator, you have the ability to control who has access to edit content on the site.

### EXAMPLE

- PBWorks: <<http://honorsprodevwed8th.pbworks.com>> (honors class wiki from fall 2009)

### WORD CLOUDS

Wordle.net is the word cloud generator site I am using in my fall 2009 class when we discuss the messages presented in my students' resumé's. The site also could be used to visualize the focus of a personal statement. All you need to do is paste the text you want to use onto the site, and a word cloud will be generated. Students then can adjust the font, add colors, change the format, etc., to personalize their word cloud. Examples are provided on the website.

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