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It's the Pedagogy, Stupid

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Fifteen years ago the University of Central Arkansas (UCA) hired a technology consultant and asked the science dean to gather information for him about the best technology for each academic unit. Eager to boldly go where we had not gone before, we met with the dean and were surprised to learn that technology was mainly about distance education, and since we taught “up close and personal” we had no need of it. It was years later before the “duh!” moment arrived.

We had asked the wrong question—not which technology was best, but which pedagogy. Like most honors settings, we use multiple models, including student-questioning (roughly speaking, the Socratic method), lecture and discussion, and team projects, and we see the latter becoming ever more strategically critical. Recent articles about trends in honors colleges (Cobane, 2008; Scott and Frana, 2008), assessment of honors courses (Lanier, 2008), experiential education (Machonis, ed., 2008), active learning (Clark and Zubizarreta, eds., 2008), and the place of pedagogical innovation in honors programs and colleges (Bell, 2008) underscore the growing importance of project-based courses. In this paper we distinguish among three pedagogical models before turning to examples of student projects that use appropriate educational technology. We conclude by discussing benefits projects provide.

Socratic methods, the oldest pedagogical model, have us ask students questions, in turn eliciting dilemmas or contradictions and revealing fallacies previously taken for granted. A master of critical thought encircled by deeply curious and articulate students is what the dean imagined honors courses to be, participants face-to-face, cross-legged on the floor, practicing the art of inquiry.

Lecture and discussion approaches, probably the most common pedagogy in higher education, have us present an original essay comprised of inter-textual connections to students who listen, take notes, ponder, and reply to our questions when oration ends, practicing the art of contextual conversation. If honors seminars had enrollments of fifty and up, the dean might have proposed PowerPoint. They do not, so he did not.

Team projects, the most interactive form of pedagogy, have us enable students to generate a product by dividing labor and working together, negotiating their roles and tasks, peer-to-peer, within expectations we structure, practicing the art of collaboration. The dean did not envision active learning located beyond the honors classroom or service projects or transactions with clients. Further, it was difficult at the outset of the Internet revolution to understand how technology could enable instructors interested in project-based, student-centered learning to pursue aims that are arduous or impossible with traditional methods.

Collaborative writing is one form of team project we now use. Instead of having each student write essays on a final exam, the class can be divided into groups who work on essays together, supplementing scarce in-class time when everyone is together with asynchronous collaboration on a simple service like Writeboard or a more complex web-based writing tool like Google Docs. After a small team drafts each essay, other teams or the entire class can be given access to edit, revise, extend, and polish.

The instructor can easily control access to shared online writing and editing spaces, taking into account each student's roles at any particular time. Without the possibility of asynchronous group work, and without a single interactive document that can be accessed and changed by multiple, shifting groups of people, the collaborative production of a text would be far more daunting. An example of a collaboratively written final exam (spring 2008) by eight UCA honors students using 123writeboard.com is at http://homepage.mac.com/donnadb/Honors_Pulse2.pdf. We do not suggest that collaborative writing *replace* individual assignments through which each student learns well-rounded writing skills. Instead, collaborative writing is an opportunity to *add* project-oriented skills to the student's writing experiences—for example, negotiation, editing, and management—and to *practice* a different way of producing a text, one with many real-world analogues.

We are intrigued by a pedagogy that makes classroom walls porous so that student work becomes a communication not to the instructor but to a larger public, an audience who can potentially hold students accountable, and current Internet technology makes logistical hurdles trivial. We have students keep course blogs and record podcasts on class discussions, practices that open up their understanding of and response to class material to the larger world. If the instructor takes the next logical step and promotes these class activities through links on social networking sites, then students quickly find that people they do not know are reading, listening, and responding. They are not primarily jumping through a hoop prescribed on a syllabus; they are communicating to people unseen and are responsible in a new way for clarity, comprehensiveness, and thoughtfulness. Blogs kept by students in

recent UCA honors seminars can be found at <<http://everyonesacritic.wordpress.com>>.

The barriers to these pedagogical benefits are not technical but psychological. Instructors must be able to commit to the kind of transparency this openness brings to their courses. And they must themselves be active participants in online communities so they can promote students' work within their circle of influence online, lest the blogs and podcasts go largely unnoticed.

Sharing coursework with outside audiences was possible before the Internet, but it could not be done so freely and thoroughly. If the pedagogical aim is to infuse curricular activities with significance beyond the academic transaction of assignments and grades, then communication to extramural participants must be pervasive, repeated, and student-initiated. Blogs and podcasts enable pursuit of a valuable aim that otherwise might be impossible offline.

The goal of project-based pedagogy is to produce principal investigators (PIs) who can lead task-oriented teams. Arguably, this role subsumes skill-sets produced by question-based and lecture-based pedagogies. For honors curricula that are developmental with sequenced courses, it makes sense to incorporate more project-based work in upper-division courses, providing increasing occasions for maturing students to perform as PIs and team leaders.

Projects make possible one other leap: incorporating extramural evaluation of course assignments. This kind of evaluation may well be a final frontier of collegiate honors education, where instructors break free of the role conflict between coaching students and evaluating them. Examples on campus abound, ranging from athletic contests to juried art and music competitions to business internships to student-teaching apprenticeships. Through online technologies, honors seminars too can be open to off-campus evaluation, judging not only students' projects but, by implication, our instruction.

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