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Using Flickr to Connect a Multi-Campus Honors Community

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Web 2.0 tools that facilitate social connections are popular among today's college students. Our students use social networks to stay connected with friends and family members. However, the networks can be more than just social; while maintaining their personal and community-building value, they can at the same time facilitate intellectual and artistic discussions on a common theme.

The Pennsylvania State University is a large geographically dispersed, multi-campus institution. Twenty of the twenty-four campuses provide undergraduate programming, and each campus has its own honors program under the umbrella of the Penn State Honors Consortium. The consortium focuses its mission on establishing guidelines and common requirements across all honors programs. The campus programs offer a variety of similar activities for academic engagement in honors at the campus, including honors-designated courses, honors travel-abroad opportunities, speaker series, etc. Although the consortium acts to bring together each of the campus honors coordinators, it does not connect the students across programs.

One area on which we have recently decided to focus our efforts is creating a sense of community among the honors students across all the campuses. As the campuses are located across the state of Pennsylvania, with some campuses as much as seven hours away from one another, it is not feasible to coordinate face-to-face student meetings. Therefore, we have turned to online tools to forge the connections, specifically the use of the photo-sharing tool Flickr <<http://www.flickr.com>>.

Inspiration for a cross-campus photography collaboration came from an email message posted on the NCHC listserv in fall 2008 by the Macaulay Honors College at The City University of New York. Macaulay Honors

College was looking for other honors colleges to partner with them for their “Snapshot NYC” program. The program asks every first-year student to take a picture related to a common theme. A faculty and student curatorial team then selects photographs for a student exhibition. The Penn State Honors Consortium thought that we could also use photography to connect our own university students on separate campuses.

At our fall 2008 Honors Consortium meeting, we discussed the NCHC posting and decided that we would use Flickr to pilot a university-wide honors program student collaborative project. Flickr is an “online photo management and sharing application” that allows us to create a community to which authorized members contribute images viewable by the general public. We were excited to show students an academic use of Flickr rather than just posting and organizing personal photographs for social networking.

The honors coordinators decided on a theme for the students to frame the project. The term “EVOLVE” was selected to represent historic tributes and events in early 2009, such as the two-hundredth birthday of both Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln as well as the inauguration of the first African American president. Students were encouraged to consider what the term “EVOLVE” meant to them and how to represent that meaning through a photograph. Each student was required to provide a title and description for the photograph contributed to the Flickr group. The deadline to post the photographs online was February 12, the birthday of Darwin and Lincoln. The key to the “EVOLVE” project was not just taking and viewing photos but using the Flickr website to social network around an image.

Overall we were pleased with our first attempt to create a cross-campus honors community. The “EVOLVE” project provided a new opportunity to incorporate active learning and Web 2.0 technology for a virtual academic dialogue. The twenty-five images contributed by students were in essence the starting point for twenty-five conversations that normally would not take place during the semester. The project also facilitated conversations among the honors students at the local campuses, inspiring them to have a local peer-to-peer dialogue about the project and submitted images. Some of the students provided thoughtful comments, such as:

- “There are several different expressions of evolution, mostly of the human nature. For example, materialism and consumerism were expressed in at least three of the photographs. . . . One group talked about how people were evolving to the fastest possible thing, citing fast food as preferred over regular food. A topic for other photos was what I would like to call meta-evolution, or evolution in the things that people use, such as televisions and newspapers.”

- “I found it quite interesting to see many pictures which were associated with the changing of the seasons since I myself had never thought of evolution that way.”
- “The images captured lots of meaning, which was entirely unique to the person who was viewing them. My view was hardly ever identical to that of the person who submitted them. It shows how our individuality [a]ffects the way we view everything. Our perspective of our own realities define[s] the images we see in our own ways. This seems to me like an evolution of our minds.”
- “I’m glad someone took the negative approach to evolve as well, because sometimes evolution isn’t good—especially when we hurt the environment doing so. The critique of consumerism, the advent of technology, and the fall of the written newspaper and other low-tech forms of news-gathering were all mentioned and all a significant part.”

The project was also a success for the coordinators. It provided us an opportunity to collaborate on a project in a way we had not in the past. To build on the limited success of the project, we will develop a set of best practices for coordinators and students; this will include strategies for incorporating the project into regular honors coursework and advertising methods for students earning honors credits in non-honors designated courses. We will broaden the leadership in the project by asking students to assist in all phases of development and post-project assessment, thereby allowing students to take some ownership of the collaboration.

We have decided to continue with the Flickr project in spring 2010, connecting the project with the Winter Olympic Games under the theme “COMPETITION & CITIZENSHIP.” We will ask our students to submit their photos during the same dates as the Olympics, from the day of the opening ceremonies to the day of the closing ceremonies. We will have a gold, silver, and bronze medal winner for the top three photographs and descriptions submitted.

The large, fragmented nature of a multi-campus university can be offset by the integration of Web 2.0 technologies such as Flickr. Although some people question how personal online communication can be, the Internet is allowing us to create connections between individuals that were formerly a challenge to establish and were thus rare in our community. We look forward to continuing to use Flickr as an online social-networking tool to foster collaboration and innovation in a virtual academic community.

To view the spring 2010 Flickr project, please visit [<http://tinyurl.com/psuhonorscc>](http://tinyurl.com/psuhonorscc).

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