

Chapter 5.2

Bothering with Technology: Building Community in an Honors Seminar

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the role that technology can play in a first-year Honors seminar. For the purposes of the chapter, blended learning is defined as re-tasking face-to-face time or out of class time to build community and meet course objectives more effectively. The challenge in an Honors seminar, however, is to apply this when technology is not considered a viable solution to potential course challenges. The chapter presents four strategies to build community through interaction and engagement: (1) icebreakers can be moved online to build more student interaction; (2) online journals can facilitate better engagement with the course and the texts; (3) documents can be delivered online to model good practice and promote sustainability; and (4) quizzes can be used to develop metacognitive skills outside of class. Technology, it is concluded, allows instructors to explore effective and engaging mediated instruction in multiple formats.

INTRODUCTION

The inherent emphasis of any Honors program in the United States is a face-to-face interaction between faculty and students (NCHC, n. d.). Many Honors programs or colleges across the nation see this as essential to any Honors experience for their students. It is an emphasis in need of re-examination when one considers the benefits that technology can provide the Honors instructor and student. However, it is also an emphasis ingrained in Honors, which reflects a bias in education generally that assumes online education is somehow less rigorous than face-to-face traditional instruction.

Technology in higher education has become more of a given than an exception—especially as instructors try to leverage student interest in technology to engage them in learning. There has also been a concomitant rise in research discussing the ways in which instructors can leverage these technologies to better engage their users in learning. Moore et al. (2008), for example, refer to what they term as “new learning” which is student-centered and technologically enriched.

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In saying this, it does need to be emphasized that students are not homogeneous. Thus, while I will argue in this chapter that engaging students and Honors students in particular, with technology is a must in contemporary higher education, it should be remembered that there needs to be support built into the learning of and use of technology.

This chapter will review the author's uses of technology to enrich the learning experiences of students in a first year Honors course in critical reading and writing. I will show through an examination of this case that Honors instructors can use technology in order to engage their learners in the work of a busy course. As the 2003 National Learning Initiative Annual Review notes:

Technologies ... enable learners and teachers to enhance their learning and to learn different things in different ways. Technologies make it possible for us to envisage different strategies that help learners learn and to organize learning experiences that address areas likely to be difficult to master. This is why we bother with technologies: they have the potential to expand choices about how we teach and learn. (Educause, 2003, p.10)

As an aside, I would like to distinguish between face-to-face, Web-enhanced, blended, and fully online instruction. The first and last of these terms are generally obvious: the first is a class where instruction occurs in the classroom and through activities such as reading and homework outside of class; the last is a course that is delivered completely online, where the students never formally meet face-to-face. The other two terms are not so obviously dissimilar. Both refer to instruction that falls somewhere in between the first and last terms. However, for the purposes of this chapter I define Web-enhanced as instruction that makes use of Web resources or a course management system to deliver support and perhaps activities without replacing face-to-face time. Blended instruction takes on a slightly less more accepted definition of using online resources and experiences to actually

re-task (rather than formally replace) face-to-face time. Indeed, I would argue that such a definition also allows us to consider blended learning where homework or out of class activities can also be re-tasked to accomplish course objectives that might traditionally be placed in class.

In this chapter, the strategies to be discussed fall into these latter two categories. I have replaced instruction time in class with online activities to build community. Below I discuss the use of the Blackboard Vista discussion tool to replace in class icebreakers. I also use the discussion tool's journal feature to create more engagement with the texts and the teacher. In many instances these also replace some preliminary discussions in class. I was also able to replace activities such as the "syllabus dump" that can overwhelm students on day one of the class. Rather, I use Vista to quiz students on the syllabus, asking them to read it outside of class. The quiz tool can also be used to build metacognitive skills, and I describe an example of that in writing instruction. Finally, for Web enhanced, I share how a course management system can be used to not only deliver documents, but to build on that ideal to make a course more student centric through enhancing turnaround times on graded assignments.

BACKGROUND

Hays (2004) suggests that case study and ethnographic research methods are similar, except that the latter asks broader questions, is more culturally focused, and can involve more time in the field. Yin (2003) shows that the former gets at the rich data of ethnography through multiple methods, including the examination of documents and reports, interviews, observations, and quantitative methods such as surveys. This chapter is an amalgam of both, in part predicated by the fact that what is here described is based on my own practice. I have argued elsewhere that case studies can represent the researcher more

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