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Teaching teachers children's literature via the Internet

After twenty years of university teaching, I now find myself creating and teaching courses and never meeting many of my students face to face. The Internet and e-mail are our only connections. Can children's literature course work be taught this way? I'm used to lugging hundreds of wonderful new books to class, reading aloud to students, encouraging students to examine book illustrations, to discuss with each other their responses to books and their childhood memories of reading. Can that be duplicated without meeting in the same room at the same time on a weekly basis? These are issues that plagued me as I considered the potential of online teaching. Envisioning teacher education with the new technologies of literacy is a quantum leap for our profession. We've been a hands-on enterprise for a long time. Personally, I have found this next step a rewarding endeavor. The Internet and other information and communication technologies have been valuable tools for my own professional development. I just had not made the leap to total instruction via the Internet. But, I also recognize it's not for everyone (yet)--either for all students or for all faculty. Nevertheless, I would like to share my early experiences in the hope of providing commentary in the ongoing study of literature teaching and learning.

In the Fall of 1998, Jeanne Gerlach, my dean in the School of Education at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA), invited me to investigate the possibilities for offering Reading coursework over the Internet. After much deliberation, I came to believe that graduate courses in my discipline, rather than undergraduate courses, lent themselves more readily to distance delivery. I hoped that these hard-working older students would be mature adults, experienced teachers and more disciplined students. In March, 1999, I developed an initiative that proposed taking one specific program totally online: the ESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) endorsement, a graduate program for teachers in a much

needed pedagogical area across the state of Texas. It included the following courses--multicultural literature for children, content area reading and writing, basic linguistics for educators, and methods for teaching ESL students.

A course I had developed and taught for six years on campus, Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults, was the first to go "up." The first course was offered in the Summer, 1999, to 19 students. The responses of students enrolled in the first Web-based course were very positive. They appreciated not having to drive from 20 to 200 miles to take the course. Some students took vacations or moved during the course and were still able to keep up electronically. Many had multiple job commitments or were raising young children at home. One deaf student commented on how much she enjoyed a "level playing field" in following the Web-based lectures and interacting with classmates through text-only assignments.

ONLINE VS. ONCAMPUS LEARNING

As the instructor, I have also been trying to compare and contrast Internet teaching with more traditional teaching on campus. Initial results are similar to what most studies nationwide have found: the medium of instruction does NOT make a significant difference. Students are learning just as much online as they would on campus. Grades, test scores, and student satisfaction are comparable. What is different is the capacity of Internet coursework to "force" students to develop their technological expertise, and, from a university's point of view, to extend course offerings to an even greater circle of students. Indeed, these courses have generated interest outside the state of Texas, and we now have students enrolled from New York to Nebraska. This has also provided the benefit of extending the network of students outside the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Teachers taking the courses are communicating with colleagues across the country about com-

mon content and concerns.

But there are also problems. Not all students are suited to distance learning at this point in time. Surprisingly this has less to do with technological expertise than it does with the old-fashioned attributes of self-motivation and self-discipline. Our Internet courses are not glorified correspondence courses. They require a high level of interaction and commitment, with regular deadlines set throughout the semester. Some students have not been able to manage their time successfully without the instructor visibly reminding them as they might in an on campus course. Internet instructors are beginning to realize how important they are in helping students “persist” in distance education (Dean, 1995). However, some students are not honest or self-aware enough to recognize this procrastination problem beforehand. Thus, a handful of Internet students are failing their courses due to a lack of follow through. In face-to-face classes imminent failure seems to be a humiliating prospect, and more students seem to drop before reaching a point of no return.

Despite these factors, I feel good about the quality of the experience provided for most students, and their response shows it meets their needs, too. The next step has been to create and add Internet sections of additional reading courses each semester, bringing in more faculty to deliver an entire Master’s degree in Reading over the Internet.

INTERNET COURSE SCENARIO

What’s it like to take a course over the Internet? Experiences vary somewhat, but in our program, students first go through the usual process of university admission and registration, with the University of Texas TeleCampus registering students in addition to the Internet delivery of the course. Then they can log on to the course from any computer any time, at home or at school; morning, noon, or middle of the night. The freedom and convenience of learning this way is one of the major advantages of Internet delivery. The challenge is to maintain the self-discipline to keep up with the course deadlines. Our courses delivered over the Internet are relatively “low-tech.” This means they are purposely designed to be extremely accessible from even the most basic computers found in the average person’s home. They don’t require any special equipment beyond Internet access. Course material is presented in “slide show” format with some text to read on the screen, arranged in reader-friendly bullet, list, and narrative forms. Colorful graphics and book cover art, for example, add zest to the material. Brief video and audio clips and Web links can extend the learning possibilities. I consciously chose NOT to include videotaped lectures for two reasons. They are difficult for students to download, and I believe there are better ways to teach and learn--even on campus. Students read through “modules” of material at their own pace. They can stop and start, go back and review, as they choose. Questions are posed along the way within

the text to help them process the information. Personal examples, booklists, and teaching tips are shared. They can even print the material into hard copy format and keep a class notebook of “lecture” materials, if they find that helpful. Students are still required to read an assigned textbook and packet of articles and readings, but the Web course provides guidance in understanding those materials, as well. Sometimes students seem surprised that there are also books to read (in a Reading class)! But indeed, I still use textbooks, packets, and children’s books. Students can purchase their textbooks and packet of readings online, and I urge them to use local and school libraries for obtaining the children’s books (although many enjoy the services of amazon.com and other online booksellers).

All assignments are completed electronically, too. Tests are taken directly over the Internet, and students receive immediate feedback on each question of each test. The test is timed, and students are honor bound NOT to use books, notes or help of any kind. For some faculty, this seems to be THE most critical issue. They log on to the class Web Board (created by O’Reilly Technology) or “chat room” to discuss questions, issues, and topics with the instructor and with each other. However, these are “asynchronous,” so that one can post and read at any time. Even the most shy student participates in these class discussions! Students post many of their assignments this way as well, sharing their research and insights with each other through this common electronic forum. Some assignments are e-mailed directly to the professor with individual feedback returned. Either way, there is a great deal of reading and writing built into the total learning experience. Over 1200 electronic interactions occurred in the first ESL course offering. And, only basic computer competence is necessary (logging on to a Website, sending and receiving e-mail), although taking the course itself provides invaluable practice in using technology and builds confidence with this important teaching and learning tool. To give you an idea of the kinds of assignments my students completed electronically in the Multicultural Literature course, here is an overview directly from the syllabus.

6 EXAMS (one for each Module). Take exams online at your convenience. You may not use books, notes, friends, etc. for the exam. See Module deadline for each Module exam.

10+ ELECTRONIC POSTINGS TO CLASS DISCUSSION (10 required). You must post at least once to the Class Discussion on the Web Board for *each* Module by Module deadline.

1 AUTHOR STUDY (post on the Web Board during the Module relevant to the author’s culture if possible, or by Nov. 30 at the very latest). Post your *choice* of author on the Web Board as soon as possible, so that each person will be researching a different author.

1 RESEARCH PAPER AND PROJECT (e-mail this to the instructor and post the one page review on the Web Board by Dec. 7). Be sure your topic is focused on some aspect of multicultural literature.

30 BOOKTALKS (one for each required children's book). E-mail each of your Module Booktalks to each member of your Bookgroup and to your instructor by the deadline for each relevant Module.

How do students begin?

Students need 3 different electronic tools to take the following UTA Internet courses:

- ♦ UT TeleCampus
<<http://www.telecampus.utsystem.edu>>
- ♦ Web Board
<<http://uttelecampus.utsystem.edu:8080/~read>>
- ♦ E-mail (Students can use their home accounts or access a free UTA student account.)

The TeleCampus is where the so-called "lecture" material is housed and where students take their tests over the course material. The Web Board is where students post many of their assignments for their classmates and instructor to read and discuss. Two way asynchronous interaction adds a necessary component for teacher development. The ability to question and interact with the instructor and peers is essential in any course taken by an educator (Box, 1999). Some of the best discussions about content, issues, and personal responses occur here. For example, here's one sample Web Board entry:

In the past, I went (to teach) in 1989-1991 to a Dallas independent School District school. At the time, the district was trying to meet quotas of ethnicity diversity and stated that "44% are to be black, 22% are to be Hispanic, and the remainder will fit in the other categories" would be the makeup of our school. When the board was asked why Asians were not considered ('cause they are considered a minority usually) in the mix—the response was "they are not disadvantaged" — many people were outraged at this statement but it just goes to show the stereotype discussed was still present in this actual situation— not all Asians are "smart"!

Being part Asian, I also know that some teachers assumed that help was not needed just because I was Asian (but that is a whole other story)... Hopefully, this new breed of teachers will break stereotypes like this—I know it is not true of all teachers and I do appreciate all the ones that helped me at the time but I want to leave you with the thought that we are the teachers that can make the difference!! [Anonymous, 2000]

Interaction is essential

Subgroups are also formed within the class to create another, more manageable venue for student-to-student interaction.

As Hiltz (1998) discovered, small classes or groups actively mentored by an instructor are necessary in order for Web-based courses to be as effective as traditional on campus courses. Students e-mail each other in small groups of 3-4. They are assigned to "talk" about the children's books they're reading, but this blossoms into even more communication about updates on deadlines and students creating sample test questions to "psych out" the instructor in preparing for tests. Here's one sample entry:

Boy, Bridget, you really read some interesting books. I almost picked up **Buffalo Woman** from the library during the Native American module, but I didn't like the pictures. You made it sound interesting. [Raquel Brown, 2000]

E-mail even enabled me to correspond with my students while I was out of the country on a study tour of Yemen, sponsored by the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations. This trip happened to dovetail perfectly with the assigned reading of Arab American literature at just that time in the course sequence. I e-mailed my students a brief narrative about Yemen from the business office of my hotel.

Communicating expectations

Students and faculty also receive support from the UTA Center for Distance Education for technical questions. Indeed, the Center developed a Web page for the ESL portion of the program (the first program aspect to be launched), to help answer students' frequently asked questions (see <<http://distance.uta.edu/TeleCampus/ESL/>>) And, as instructor, I promise to respond to all student e-mail within 72 hours, unless I've provided previous notification that I will be unavailable. This is important to state up-front, as e-mail users often come to expect instant replies. I also ask that students keep us up to date on their own e-mail addresses, since this is such a critical point of contact between us. It's important to recognize that students will probably have some technology problems at some time. For example, AOL is known for throwing our Internet students offline while they are studiously reviewing material or taking a test.

Of course, students receive an extensive syllabus with assignment rubrics and deadlines for each course they enroll in. This is in paper form in their packet of readings, as well as in electronic form on the Internet (in the TeleCampus classroom). They can review it as often as they need to. Assignment reminders are also built into the online "lectures" and are sent out via e-mail by the Instructor from time to time. For one course, for example, this is the information shared with students about assignments at an optional orientation held at the beginning of the semester:

Think of this course as a big pizza. There are six major Modules or "slices" in this pizza. With

each Module, you complete textbook and packet readings, module readings online, a test online, postings on the Web Board, and you e-mail booktalks to your small bookgroup for the children's books you're reading. Each "slice" has ONE midnight deadline for all the Module assignments (although you can always work AHEAD). Once you have finished one Module, you move on to the next "slice," until you've finished the whole "pizza" course. You will receive a grade report after the deadline for each Module. When you finish Module 6, you have finished the whole pizza—the course! There. I think I have been as clear as can be. Now it's up to you to e-mail questions, if you have any ...

Internet development scenario

What's it like developing a course for teaching over the Internet? Again, there are many approaches, but "the content is still based on learning outcomes and course goals" as Rosenblum (2000, p. 10) reminds us. Overall planning includes "designing course objectives, analyzing the audience, and framing an outline of the course content ... conventional lecture materials need to be adapted to serve as online learning tools" (Rosenblum, 2000, p. 10). Although I have had the assistance of technical staff to turn my word processing documents into Web pages, many faculty are also doing it themselves using course management tools, such as Blackboard.com or Web CT. These tools provide many fill-in-the-blank templates that can help you get started without knowing HTML. Wiens and Gunter (1998) identify three stages of Web-based instruction: design, development, and delivery. Each stage can be carried out by different parties or in consultation with area experts. In my case, I proceeded along fairly naively, with a knack for layout, but somewhat shortsighted about building in enough interaction with online instruction. The instructor's role is changing from an authoritative figure into a facilitator providing scaffolding and support during the learning process (Jiang and Ting, 1998). This is something that became very real to me as I put my "knowledge" into "Modules" and then considered what any of it would mean for students. It was very satisfying to see years' worth of notes, conference highlights, resource information, etc. all consolidated in one place. But, putting all the usual oral presentations and class handouts into "Modules" in some coherent and interesting format was only part of the task. How could I move students from passive reading to engaged and critical thinking? As a constructivist, I know students don't simply "download" knowledge. Thus the multiple venues for interaction between professor and student and between students themselves was absolutely critical. Web Board forums and e-mail Web partners became an equally important part of the course experience.

Instructor and course evaluation

Internet students also participate in end-of-course evalua-

tions. Students have offered honest and helpful input on how to improve the course. More planned interaction (especially student-to-student) has evolved. And, more interesting features are being incorporated into future iterations of the course. Next semester, I plan to incorporate low-tech (therefore easy to download) audio clips for "one-minute" overviews (in every lesson) and poem read alouds performed by children. Many insightful and positive comments have been shared as well. Here's one example from the Multicultural Literature course.

When talking about different cultures, sometimes the conversation can be more sensitive. I think over the Internet people are more free with their opinions and are not so worried about offending someone. [Sherry Burgdorf, 2000]

CONCLUSION

What next? It would be helpful to have forums for instructors to discuss their Web-based teaching experiences. We could compare our approaches to delivering engaging content and in fostering meaningful interaction with and between students over the Internet. Will it eventually become a special treat to come to a university campus, meet the professor, and hang out with fellow students? I miss the personal bond I formed with top notch students. With Internet courses, I become very familiar with students' work, even their writing voices, but not with them. When I meet them, usually accidentally, it's a genuine pleasure for me to put a face with a name and an e-mail address! I may next experiment with creating a site for downloading photos, if students are willing to share something so personal online. I'm also organizing an optional face-to-face gathering on campus at the end of the semester to see if Internet students will take advantage of that opportunity.

However, the following questions remain: Can reading and children's literature courses be taught this way? Is this approach any more likely to help teachers develop their knowledge base of books? Will it inspire them to bring more literature into the classroom or to integrate literature of all kinds into their daily teaching? I don't know. But I do have the advantage of staying linked to my Internet students via our ongoing e-mail connection. So, I hope to find out more.

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