Possibilities for the Visiting e-Lecture

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We have all taught for many years, using pencils and paper in brick and mortar classrooms. But now with computers, we can teach students online, at the speed of light at 186,000 miles per second, or even more fantastic, with wireless technology. Now that's creative!

I have happily utilized the Web as a teaching environment in various ways for the past five years. In all of my face-to-face classes I use it as a virtual classroom, and also design new hybrid courses as well as ones that I teach completely online. Although we might be thousands of miles away from each other, as online learners, we are only a mouse click away.

In all of my online teaching, I like to maintain perspective by keeping the contrasting ideas of Neil Postman and Bonnie Nardi and Vicki O'Day in mind. As I navigate the wild, ever changing terrain of computer land, their ideas keep me focused on prioritizing my intentions and clarifying my instructional content.

It was my honor and privilege to know Professor Postman when I was a graduate student at New York University. He is the founder of the Program of Media Ecology and was the Chair of the Department of Culture and Communication for fifteen years. All twenty books of his books, he once proudly stated, were written on yellow legal pads. Although he is no longer with us, his voice remains strong in the literature, reminding us to be critically aware of why and how we use technology in our schools.

In Building a Bridge to the 18th Century: How the Past Can Improve our Future, Dr. Postman cautions us to be thoughtful about implementing new media in our society. He encourages us to ask, "What is the Problem to which this technology is the solution?" (Postman, 2000)

I believe that online teaching provides a new avenue for the human imagination, another way for students and teachers to creatively participate in one of the predominant cultural forms of our time, the Internet. By distributing lectures online, educators teaching at all grade levels, from elementary school through graduate school, can easily share their great ideas across distant geographies.

In Information Ecologies, Using Technology with Heart, Bonnie Nardi and Vicki O'Day present the possibilities for a holistic, ecological approach. They encourage people to engage their own values and commitments while using technology. (Nardi & O'Day, 1999) Their ideas remind me to design educational content that builds community and that continues to encourage awareness of our natural environment as a learning outcome.

As an online instructor using readily accessible techniques, I have been privileged to work with many communities of learners and to share their discoveries of themselves and others. Responding to both Postman and Nardi and O'Day, I will give an overview of what I have found to be effective ways of delivering content within digital learning ecologies.

Although it is possible, of course, to use sophisticated means to deliver online lectures, such as videoconferencing, streaming video and audio, state of the art Web page authoring software, etc., I believe that content should be the primary concern. To that end, even the most simple means can even be effective, such as sending a basic .PDF file or a Microsoft Word Document with embedded external hyperlinks via e-mail. My students have made simple instructional Web sites with various online tools on free sites such as Angelfire. NiceNet, Internet Classroom Assistant, for example, is extremely user friendly and is available free of charge. These possibilities are available to all educators without a large investment in hardware, software, or time. All that is required for online content delivery is a basic computer interface.

Stephen Johnson, in Interface Culture, tells us that the interface is the place where computers, people and ideas meet. He says that "there are few creative acts in modern life more significant that this one, and few with such broad social consequences." (Johnson, 1997)

We are all familiar with the desktop Graphical User Interface (GUI), with its folders and trash-can. In Distance Education on the Web, Course Management Systems provide a common interface for the Virtual Classroom. In my online teaching I have used:

- Web CT
- Blackboard
- Campus Pipeline
- Specific proprietary systems

(if none of these are available, group e-mail lists, course web sites on local servers, free chat rooms and free virtual classrooms such as NiceNet can be used)

My Online Courses

Ecology Art Education Online, an experimental Fine Arts Course 1999, 2000 - Ohio University, Blackboard
Art & Nature - FA 1000 Intro to Art, 2002, 2003 - Kean University, Web CT

Hybrid Courses:

Teaching Art in the Middle Schools: Computers - 2000, 2001, 2002 School of Visual Arts, Campus Pipeline, free chat rooms
Graduate Research Methods – 2003, University of the Arts, group e-mail
Art & Nature -Continuing Education, 2003 – School of Visual Arts, Campus Pipeline, free chat rooms
History of Ideas in Art and Museum Education – 2004, University of the Arts, NiceNet
Educational Media – 2004, University of the Arts, NiceNet
Interactive Media – 2004, University of the Arts, NiceNet
Technology in Art Education – 2004, School of Visual Arts, NiceNet

The Guest Online Lecture

PROBLEM: The predominant personal voice and teaching style of a typical university course is the on-campus instructor. Frequent guest lecturers are costly.

SOLUTION: Geographically remote faculty and artists can be invited to the virtual classroom for diverse perspectives.

Among many invited guests in my digital classroom, Dr. Mary Stokrocki, professor of Art Education at Arizona State University, shared her Participant - Observer research method and findings with my students on the East Coast via the Web. Her distinguished research methodology was made easily accessible to my students for review and discussion as a guest online lecture by means of an embedded hyperlink to her Web site from my course's Interactive Syllabus Schedule. (Stokrocki, 2003)

Interactive Syllabus Schedule

PROBLEM: A traditional paper syllabus schedule is static and unresponsive to student learning in real time, and presents one instructor's point of view.

SOLUTION: A dynamic electronic document can employ a constructivist approach, unfold in real time, and include embedded hyperlinks to online guest lectures.

In my courses, an online Syllabus Schedule is updated each week, with current assignments due, and embedded links for online lectures, guides, readings, and articles of interest. I have found this to be an effective way for students to develop a cumulative view of their learning process, to participate in collaborative authorship, and to stay informed about upcoming assignment due dates.

Student Assignments In Message Board

PROBLEM: It is difficult to make all student work available for reading, discussion, and assessment.

SOLUTION: A Message Board is an effective way for faculty and students to post and reply to class assignments and those built into visiting online lectures. All allow the posting of URL's and, on most of them, students are able to attach images. It is also an excellent assessment medium for use by the instructor, by the students themselves for self-reflection, and for peer critiques.

All Course Management and Virtual Classroom Interfaces have Message or Discussion Boards, or Conferencing components, where teachers and students can initiate a topic for discussion or respond to other postings. In my courses, I have found it very effective to post weekly reading topics so students may add their reflections, post images, and most importantly, reply to each

others' work. This online forum is very valuable as a resource for revisiting student course participation, making it easily accessible at all times.

A Community Of Online Learners

PROBLEM: Student projects and research are sometimes viewed within a narrow context and there is little opportunity for building an active community of learners.

SOLUTION: Digital archives of student projects, inter-institutional Internet Collaborations, and hyperlinks to professional work create a wider context for student work.

Making student portfolios from previous semesters available as an online resource can be very valuable for student learning. This can be done by digitally archiving student work including past projects from online lectures and exhibitions and linking them to the online Syllabus Schedule.

Frequently, I engage students in inter-institutional and Web-based collaborative projects with a shared online lecture as a guideline so that they might experience the richness of diverse cultural perspectives while working with others at a geographical distance. Linking to artists' personal web sites is another effective way to connect students to a critical context for their work. (Julian, 2003)

"What is the problem to which this technology is the solution?" The problem is the difficulty of effective human communication. Online learning provides a good way to extend the human dialogue into new dimensions for teaching, for learning, and for understanding.

References

Johnson, Stephen. (1997) Interface Culture: How New Technology Transforms the Way we Create and Communicate. New York: HarperCollins.

Julian, June. (2003). A World Community of Old Trees [On-line]. Available: http://www.nyu.edu/projects/julian/

Nardi, B., & O'Day, V. (1999) Information Ecologies: Using Technology with Heart. Cambridge. The MIT Press.

Postman, Neil. (2000) Building a Bridge to the 18th Century: How the Past Can Improve our Future. New York: Vintage Books.

Stokrocki, Mary. (2003). Qualitative Research, Participant Observation [On-line]. Available: http://www.public.asu.edu/~ifmls/POFolder/PartObTOC.html

Course Management Systems

Blackboard. http://www.blackboard.com

Campus Pipeline: http://sct.com/Education/p_cl_campuspipeline.html

WebCT: http://www.webct.com

NiceNet: http://www.nicenet.org