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**THE ARTIST AS ONLINE LEARNER**

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The Artist as Online Learner

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

For the past five years, I have utilized the Web as a teaching environment in various ways, from using it as an extra virtual classroom in all of my regular classes, to designing hybrid courses, as well as in teaching those that are completely online. Although we might be thousands of miles away from each other, as online learners, we are 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. 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. Sadly, at the age of seventy-two, he passed away in October 2003, yet his voice remains strong.

In Building a Bridge to the 18<sup>th</sup> 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 artists and teachers to creatively participate in the predominant cultural form of our time, the Internet.

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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)

Using my courses as examples of communities of learners in action, I will respond to both arguments, giving an overview of what I found to be effective in digital learning ecologies.

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 than 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 trashcan. In Distance Education on the Web, Course Management Systems provide the interface for the Virtual Classroom. In my online art 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, and free chat rooms can be used)

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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 - SVA, Campus  
Pipeline, free chat rooms

Graduate Research Methods and Educational Media - 2003, University of the Arts, Group  
e-mail, course web sites

Art & Nature -Continuing Education, 2003 - SVA, Campus Pipeline, free chat rooms

EXAMPLE #1 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 other 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 in the course interactive  
Syllabus Schedule.

(Stokrocki, 2003)

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#### EXAMPLE #2 INTERACTIVE SYLLABUS SCHEDULE

**PROBLEM:** A traditional paper syllabus schedule is unresponsive to student learning in real time.

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

In my courses, an online Syllabus Schedule is updated each week, with current assignments due, and embedded links for online 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.

#### EXAMPLE #3 STUDENT ASSIGNMENTS IN MESSAGE BOARD

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

**SOLUTION:** A Message Board is an effective way for faculty and students to post and reply to class assignments.

All Course Management and Virtual Classroom Interfaces have either a Message Board or a Discussion Board, 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.

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#### EXAMPLE #4 A COMMUNITY OF ONLINE LEARNERS

**PROBLEM:** Student artwork is sometimes viewed within a narrow context.

**SOLUTION:** Digital archives of student projects, Inter-Institutional Internet Collaborations, and hyperlinks to artists' sites create a wider context for student artwork.

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

Frequently, I engage students in inter-institutional and Web-based collaborative projects, 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.

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## REFERENCES

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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 18<sup>th</sup> 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: <https://library.educause.edu/resources/2001/1/campus-pipeline-inc-the-unified-digital-campus>

WebCT. <http://www.mdc.edu/ctd/webct/whatis.htm>