

A COMMUNITY WRITING PROJECT: INTEGRATION OF CLASSROOM AND E-LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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This brief essay focuses on a project I have worked on over the past two years and which I continue to develop as time permits and as new technologies make themselves available to me. This on-going experiment involves the integration of various electronic media and traditional classroom activities to create and maintain a creative writing community.

This evolving hybrid learning project seeks to integrate not only college classrooms and electronic environments but also various communities of writers, from college students enrolled in various classes to elementary school children with whom I conduct a variety of creative writing activities.

A colleague, a sixth-grade Language Arts teacher, and I presently offer, for example, a creative-writing program this summer at the local library here in Ripon, Wisconsin, weekly gathering of seventeen 4th-8th graders who engage in a variety of projects, from writing fractured fairy tales to inventing and illustrating a fantasy story. Work from these students will eventually get added to the collection of material from last year's work collected here. I invited students enrolled in the two sections of Children's Literature I now teach on-line, to view this site and others that feature the work of youngsters; and these college students also have an opportunity to try their hand at fractured fairy tales and other creative fun. Using the internet allows these two very diverse, and in this case distant groups to exchange in mutually beneficial ways, especially as most of the students enrolled in the classes plan to become elementary school teachers. The youngsters, moreover, enjoy reading what adults have to say and, often, surpassing their efforts.

I have taught Creative Writing in a traditional learning environment at college for more than a dozen years. In addition, over the past twenty years, I have also worked with elementary school children and high school students in a variety of capacities, including classroom visits and summer programs devoted to developing creative skills. Over the past two years in particular, however, the use of various electronic media has opened up exciting possibilities, allowing me to experiment with new ways in which to integrate a variety of learning communities and to engage more fully these writers in creative writing and thinking.

Here I feature some results of this project to this juncture, which include, as the preceding paragraphs indicate, on-going activities; in addition, I want as well to suggest future possibilities that will take advantage of evolving technologies. This integration of teaching environments and writing communities allows me to reach and to unite a large number and variety of people, as the following examples illustrate. The experience has also triggered my desire to embrace new possibilities, daunting though they seem to me at times, especially as I teach at a small institution with limited technological resources. Enthusiasm, however, compels one to experiment, especially as the technologies become more and more user-friendly.

After years of visiting elementary schools in Nebraska, I created a variety of creative writing sessions to spark the students' imagination; the Nebraska Humanities Council now lists these projects under both Feathers and Verses and Skills in the council's Speaker's Bureau. Feathers and

Verses itself unites various media to engage youngsters in the creative writing process that also by concentrating on common birds makes the students more sensitive to their environment; and the Skills Residency Program sessions expand upon the previously described endeavors.

These programs are new; and as this website indicates, I have begun to integrate the creative writing sessions through the internet to allow writers of all ages to share their work and, I hope, to inspire others who visit the sites that feature work from Nebraska writers and an increasing number of sites from beyond the state in which I work, including Louisiana and Wisconsin, where I live in the summer months.

This particular session with third through sixth graders, for instance, illustrates well the manner in which a variety of media from web pages to digital photographs unite to record creative writing sessions outside the traditional classroom: in a long-grass prairie, in fact. (Nebraska's Audubon Society sent the web address to the national group, many members of which visited the site and sent me notes expressing their delight.) Indeed, using the electronic media allows me to record and unify a variety of learning environments, from classroom visits to summer programs. To excite further interest from both students and school teachers (and administrators), I recently began utilizing an on-line program to record slide shows of visits, including ones this past fall and spring to Conestoga and Elk Creek Elementary Schools, the latter a very rural hybrid of the famed one-room schoolhouses that once dotted the prairies of central United States. These visual displays excited the students and thrilled school officials.

These projects continue to evolve. For example, I presently integrate flower images "Feathers, Petals, and Verses" and bird photographs and move from traditional slide shows to digital images. Eventually, students and

teachers will be able to utilize web-based writing prompts to engage further their students and their sharing of creative work. Blogs might well work to engage writings in the manner described; I utilize one now to unite in-class students and others in and outside the college community, The Creative Writing Corner, will become active again this fall, when I once again teach creative writing on-line.

I developed this particular web log in the fall of 2003, as the archives indicate, for my traditional Creative Writing course, as part of an experiment in creating a hybrid classroom environment. Among other things, all course work got published on my webpage, and the class met every other week in a computer lab where students read what their fellow writers wrote and discussed, using Blackboard Discussion Threads, their work. The Blackboard template also allowed me to expand the classroom beyond the meeting times, eliminating, if you will, walls. And as the preceding link illustrates, the Internet allows me to bring together creative work from a variety of classes, including Children's Literature, in which students were engaged in similar projects. And as the images utilized indicate, college and elementary school writers engage in similar projects and as my experience reinforces, they enjoy reading one another's work.

Comparing my more recent efforts at cataloguing class work with those from 2003 also affirms that the experiences continue as well to teach me. This project requires substantial investments of time; for example, I have yet to publish material from my spring visits to Tarkio Elementary School in Missouri and to Evangeline Elementary School in Louisiana, for other responsibilities intruded. But the sites will eventually document the students' efforts and rekindle my excitement for the project and to experiment with various media.

This particular year, for instance, I made further use of the

blog, as I developed an eight-week, on-line version of Creative Writing. The blog served as a spot to include images from various students, provided me a place to publish each week a ten to fifteen minute audio message and other items with which I experimented. And the blog will provide a forum for writers from this term's class and other writers some from previous classes--to share and discuss their work.

To say that teaching an eight-week, on-line version of Creative Writing was not my idea, but to engage in hyperbole; not given much say in the matter, I determined to make the class more squarely an integral part of my ongoing project, developing and utilizing an active creative writing community. And while ensuring that the class material got posted quickly, it required substantial blocks of my time, the students enjoyed the intensive writing experience only one student did not remain in the class. Again, all work got published on my web page. As this link indicates, the twenty two students, all novice writers, produced a tremendous amount of material, from Visual Haiku and "Snapshots" to Hyper and Nano Fiction. And Memoirs this fall, I will certainly add Fractured Fairy Tales to the mix of activities that exercise the imagination.

Among the positive aspects of this first-time effort include a wonderful mixture of writers, from stay-at-home mothers to a man recently retired from the Navy, from students also talking on-campus courses, to a recently divorced woman in another state looking for a creative outlet. This diverse mixture of writers also bonded quickly through the discussion threads that required all students to read and comment on not only published authors but also on the class work. This spring, a number of students visited the college to listen to one of the Nebraska poets we read and discussed the previous term, Ted Kooser, now the country's Poet Laureate.

Though wildly labor intensive (work which included both commenting on student writing and publishing student

efforts on the webpage), the class energized me; and students comment to one another on the Blackboard threads and to me, personally indicate that all found the course exciting. Some twenty-five students have already registered for this fall's edition of creative fun. The enthusiasm they showed, for example, on the discussion threads indicated that they had never "talked" as much or shared their thoughts as extensively in any class they had previously taken, a bonding of great importance in this kind of class.

This first-time effort provided me a wonderful foundation to experiment further with electronic media. Among other things, I utilized similar writing prompts inside the course and with the younger groups, especially with the Haiku and the Snapshots. In the near future, my plans include using similar projects in a variety of classes and creative-writing sessions in an effort to unite more cohesively this variety of writing communities. I must add, to inspire future teachers, many of my English students and future elementary school teachers who take my Children's Literature course learn in the classes and by working with me, they utilize the various technologies. In fact, as previously noted, I now teach an eight-week, on-line version of Children's Literature that incorporates a variety of creative-writing exercises I use in my Creative Writing class and in my work with youngsters. This effort will continue next summer, when I will have more time to devote to creative activities this time around, I develop the course while conducting the classes.

As this description of my efforts underscores, the project continues to evolve as I seek ways to utilize emerging technologies to develop methods to integrate various writing communities. I plan, for example, to experiment with audio-visual technologies, including streaming technology to make available to a larger audience events such as the Creative Writers Series, I have coordinated for the past ten years, and only this past year

work is included on my web page. My goals include reinforcing an appreciation for creative efforts from youngsters in elementary schools to retired people (part of the future project). My motivation also comes from a desire to instill especially in youngsters and to reinforce in college students the importance of developing and maintaining literacy skills, from reading appreciation to clarity in writing, both of which deteriorate alarmingly. I endeavor at least to stow especially with young writers the often lost connection with words and the imagination, that sense of immediacy and curiosity which youngsters possess but too quickly lose; I try to prevent the situation, e. e. cummings describes in his poem "anyone lived in a pretty how town," in which he notes about children that "down they forgot as up they grew." For older people in the

classes and involved in the various activities in which my efforts and the internet connections engage them, the writing sessions and collected work seek, in a sense, to help them remember what they have forgotten.

This kind of project suggests ways in which electronic technologies and traditional learning environments can through an imaginative integration develop and reinforce those skills and talents at the heart of the teaching enterprise and the creative process. In addition, the preceding paragraphs indicate, I firmly believe, that traditional and electronic approaches to teaching and learning are not in conflict. Their relationship, indeed, is one of reciprocity, a union that inspires learning and triggers the imagination for both instructors and writers of all ages.

Link Cited:

On-Line Version of Article by Bill Clemente:

<http://www.hpcnet.org/peru/schoolartssciences/literature/clemente/vita/professional/2005/abstrace>

Ripon Public Library:

<http://www.hpcnet.org/peru/schoolartsandsciences/language/clemente/feathers/ripon>

Fractured Fairy Tales:

<http://www.hpcnet.org/peru/schoolartsandsciences/language/clemente/203/classwork/fracture>

Feathers and Verses, Nebraska Humanities Council:

<http://www.nebraskahumanities.org/speakersVA.html>

Feathers and Verses, Homepage of Bill Clemente:

<http://www.hpcnet.org/peru/schoolartsandsciences/language/clemente/feathers>

Prairie Discovery Days:

<http://www.hpcnet.org/peru/schoolartsandsciences/language/clemente/feathers/audubon>

Gathering of Birds Slide Show of Digital Images:

<Http://www.flickr.com/photos/clemente/sets/132472>

Creative Writing Corner Blog:

<http://billteacher.blogspot.com>

Creative Writing Class Work 2002-2003:

<http://www.hpcnet.org/schoolartsandsciences/language/clemente/classesfall2003/309>

