



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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USING AN INTERACTIVE MULTIMEDIA CLASSROOM: MAKING A CONNECTION

As we search for pedagogy that helps us help students connect with subject matter, we often discover that incorporating technology into the classroom makes our jobs easier. I have discovered that by having an interactive multimedia classroom equipped with Elmo, Smart Board, VCR/DVD, and Internet access, not only have students enjoyed the course more than ever, but grades and attendance have improved as well.

Students and Reading

In American Literature I, we study literature from 1600-1868. The material is difficult for students, especially at the beginning of the course, primarily because of the unfamiliar language and writing styles. We examine journals or political excerpts discussing personal dilemmas, hardships of the land, and political and Puritanistic views. Students struggle with comprehension, often admit that the only materials they understand are the titles, and find the reading boring, excessive, and irrelevant to their lives in 2007. We begin by discussing how, like all of us, these new Americans searched for a strong sense of purpose, a comfortable home, and meaningful relationships.

Incorporating Technology

Now all my lecture notes are PowerPoint, which help students with their note taking. With the Smart Board, I can highlight and mark the most important material and display pictures of an author, his or her home, spouse, and children. And when we discuss the first universities in the New World, we take the virtual tour at Harvard; when we study Thomas Jefferson, we enjoy a panoramic view of Monticello; when we read Cotton Mather's "The Trial of Bridget Bishop," we access the court transcripts (students are shocked by the questions and testimony at trial). When we critique Phyllis Wheatley's "To S.M., a Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works," we examine and discuss primitive art online. We look at examples of Mose Tolliver's work, one of the most renowned

primitive artists of our region. Students connect to the author and material, and begin to appreciate and even enjoy Mose T's depiction of George Washington. They do not just hear about Anne Bradstreet, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson, or Abraham Lincoln; they are given visual insight into their residences, work, and marriages.

This visual evidence makes a tremendous difference in students' abilities to understand the realities of life so many years ago. I bring in materials to use on the Elmo; this equipment is invaluable because even the smallest of items can be magnified for the class to view on the Smart Board. We take citizenship tests to delineate how little most native-born Americans know about their country. Moreover, *Time* has had numerous articles and photographs on the importance of Jefferson, Douglas, Washington, and Franklin; and *American Heritage* hosts a myriad of articles to incorporate in the course. This year, Mary Todd Lincoln's letters, written while she was in an asylum, were found in an abandoned trunk. "Antiques Roadshow" and "Bottom Line" reveal how much Native Americans' arrowheads and Poe's first version of "The Raven" are worth today if they are in mint condition. Tommy Hilfiger has manufactured a smaller version of Mount Vernon available for purchase; students examine the miniature via the Elmo and speculate on how much the unfurnished and furnished playhouses cost—actually, \$750,000 and \$980,000, respectively (complete with candlesticks and bed linens). With the VCR/DVD combination as part of the Smart equipment, students view portions of *The Day Lincoln Died* and Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* on the large screen. Often, I schedule impromptu writings after these viewings and am amazed at how much information students are able to absorb by supplementing course material with technology.

Students and Assignments

In addition to journal assignments and formal essays, students are required to select a presentation topic from a long list of options. Years ago, I discovered that students connected more fully with the writers and material if I did not allow presentation topics on the authors we had discussed in class. Now I offer a diverse list of



topics: furniture, architecture, art, dance, food, courting rituals, ships, wigs, clothing, quilting, witchcraft, battles, uniforms, weapons, plantations, flags, types of punishment, presidents, their wives, inventions, games, money—all within the time period covered in the course. On the first day of class, I present students the grading rubric for presentations, which includes required visual and creativity components. The presentations have been outstanding because students are given the opportunity to utilize technology in an extremely creative way. Most enjoy using PowerPoint, but many dress in period attire while presenting, show hand-drawn sketches, build ships or instruments of punishment, cook foods common to the time, or share background information on their own Native American heritage with artifacts. Students leave the course with a firm grasp of what the period was like, as opposed to memorizing information about its writers. After they begin to understand the period—what the early Americans fought for and how and why this country began with The Age of Discovery and made the transition to the Romantic Period—they associate better with the material, realizing why these writers wrote, and understanding what concerned them, what they suffered through, and what they wanted to experience in their lives. Thus, important connections are made.

Conclusion

As more technology is being utilized in college classrooms, educators often worry that they may diminish that personalized, meaningful student-teacher relationship that they work to develop. However, when technology supplements teaching and allows students to view course material first-hand, it is an effective way to help students gain an important appreciation for course material and information that might otherwise be sterile, unexciting, and uninteresting. I cannot imagine being in a classroom without this diverse array of technological support; it augments both my instructional ability and the students' capacities to comprehend, appreciate, and enjoy the material more fully.

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