

TEACHING THEORIES, TEACHING PRACTICE

The current funding crisis for post-secondary education encourages the exploration of new teaching methods to meet the challenge of "doing more with less". One frequently-proposed solution focuses on using computer technology to solve this problem. Using computers both in the classroom and on the internet, the argument goes, will enhance the student learning experience and improve faculty efficiency. Reaction to this scenario has been divided. University administrators, with an eye to fiscal responsibility, and wanting to appear open to new approaches, tend to embrace this approach enthusiastically. Faculty reaction, while diverse, has been more circumspect. Some voice concerns about the economic costs, the change in teacher-student relations, and the implications of proceeding too quickly without discussing the pedagogical issues involved. Others, whose position was forcefully articulated by David Noble in his recent article "Digital Diploma Mills", reject this proposal out of hand. They argue that a move to computer technology would inevitably result in the commercialization of the university, the loss of faculty independence and autonomy, a "degraded, shadow cybereducation" for students and perhaps a virtual university, without faculty of any stripe.

Our experience using the net and computers in the classroom to teach our World History course at the University of British Columbia leads us to reject both extremes in this continuum. We see computer technology as neither the gateway to the "new reality" nor the purveyor of a "dismal new era of higher education" foretold in Noble's jeremiad. Instead, we have found that using computers enriches student learning in a number of extremely important ways.

In 1996, Bob Kubiack launched History 150: World History Since 1500, a year-long course that covers world-history from the initial river valley civilizations to the 1990s. The course is based on recent scholarship that explores the human experience from a global perspective and stresses the migration and mingling of peoples. The amount of material presented in this broad geographic and chronological sweep, coupled with the arrival on campus of a new generation of visually-oriented learners, suggested a fresh approach. We decided that the new educational technologies could help us meet this challenge. Within the classroom we used computer-generated visual materials such as images, customized maps and animated graphs along with short video-clips and segments of CD-ROMS to provide concrete examples of abstract concepts and to involve students in analyzing these elements. Using computers allowed us to enhance and enrich the learning environment.

Using the Internet presented other opportunities. Our goals for our use of the Internet, achieved through WebCT, a course tolls package developed at UBC, were to increase student involvement and to build a learning community while encouraging the

students to become familiar with course material through a variety of group and individual activities. I was involved in both these technological aspects of the course as I am responsible for developing the visual materials, designing and maintaining the course's Website, and working with the online group.

Students attend two lectures and one tutorial session per week. The twenty-two students who volunteer for the on-line group meet in a computer lab during their tutorial slot and divide this hour between oral and on-line work. While these sessions iron out problems and develop oral presentation skills, the students are most productive when tackling the three assignments they regularly carry out online - glossary development, asynchronous group discussion, and website evaluation.

The shift in our approach to glossary development aptly illustrates the benefits and challenges of working on the web. Initially, we generated definitions for the plethora of unfamiliar terms in the course and posted them to the web for student use. Within the first month of class, however, students suggested additions or deletions to our selections and proposed expanded definitions for particular terms. At this point, we saw the potential for student-directed group learning and encouraged students to assume this responsibility themselves. Students now work in small groups identifying and creating their own definitions. After they refine their definitions, their submissions are "vetted" and posted to the web. Glossary development, as it stands now, encourages online students to review lecture notes and readings, consider the material, and generate a socially useful end product. In this way, students play a more active role in course development. While glossary development continues to be a learning experience for the students, the process of refining this assignment was also a learning experience for us. It re-emphasized the importance of both the process and product in student learning. In view of this new understanding, we have retained the assignment for the present class although our original class had produced an extensive seventy-two page glossary.

Online students also participate in a number of asynchronous, in-depth discussions. With the guidance of a rotating leader, small groups refine lecture questions, define terms, set parameters and synthesize material from lectures and reading to explore the questions and reach conclusions. At the end of two weeks, the discussions are opened to their colleagues in the full online group and are presented and discussed in class. Students then receive feedback from their colleagues and a written evaluation from the instructor. The depth and sophistication of student work is exhilarating. In part this results from the nature of the exchange, which encourages students to think before responding, and in part to the nature of the forum, which seems to empower such class members as women, and students whose cultures discourage arguing with or criticizing others. While these students had been only nominal

participants in other venues, in these discussions they largely lose their reticence and add immeasurably to the level of discussion and their own learning experience.

Individual website evaluations are the third assignment for online students. This element builds on the critical skills students are developing in relation to printed sources and applies them to web-based materials. Students "search" rather than "surf" the web and identify sites related to issues covered in the course. Based on parameters drawn up in class, students submit critical evaluations of these websites and assign an overall rating using a 15 star scale. Student recommendations are evaluated by the instructor, then linked to the appropriate lecture online, giving students credit for their contributions.

Our experience proves to us that computer-based instruction can significantly enhance students' learning environment. In the abstract this new medium gives students an active role in course development and provides a forum where previously reticent students can participate comfortably while addressing the diverse learning styles of contemporary classrooms. In concrete terms, computer technology provides a forum for discussion that encourages more sophisticated and extended analyses of assigned questions and promotes the development and extension of critical skills.

Yet these benefits are not without cost. Creating materials for the classroom and the web, in the early development phase, is both labour and capital intensive. Although history shows that these costs will probably drop dramatically as we move from development to wide-scale production, the immediate expense of going online calls into question the view, shared by many administrators, that this form of teaching will solve the problem of the rising cost of university education. From an instructional point of view I would argue that, while a prudent approach to new technology has its merits, we should become much more engaged. To serve our students' and our own interests we should learn the advantages and disadvantages of using computers in the classroom through practical teaching experience rather than reject the technology on the bases of theoretical and perhaps ill-informed arguments.

We invite you to come visit our class site and see what our students are doing. See

<http://homebrew.cs.ubc.ca>:

8900/SCRIPT/HIST150/SCRIPTS/serve_home.login.

Our I.D. is "visitor" and password to "friendly".

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CALLS FOR PAPERS/DEMANDES DE COMMUNICATIONS

Les 16 et 17 octobre prochains aura lieu à l'Université Laval le 51^e congrès de l'Institut d'histoire de l'Amérique française qui a pour thème «*Médecine, santé et sociétés*». Les propositions de communication doivent parvenir avant le **31 mars 1998** à Johanne Daigle, département d'histoire de l'Université Laval, Cité universitaire, Sainte-Foy, QC; G1K 7P4; télécopieur (418) 656-3603; courriel ihaf98@hst.ulaval.ca

History graduate students at Yale University announce a one-day, multidisciplinary conference entitled **History and Memory**, to be held at Yale University April 18, 1998. We encourage topics that explore the invention of tradition, collective memory, historiography, uses of history, politics of memory, nationalism, and related subjects. Prof. Michael Kammen of Cornell will be our keynote speaker. Interested parties are invited to submit a one-page abstract by **March 1, 1998**. Send abstracts via e-mail to memory@pantheon.yale.edu, or regular mail at History & Memory, c/o George E. Haddad, MD, Dept. of History of Medicine and Science, L-130 SHM, P.O. Box 208015, Yale University, New Haven, CT, 06520. For the latest updates and further details on registration, etc. please see our website at <http://www.yale.edu/memory>.

