Using Classroom-Based Technologies to Engage Students and Promote Learning
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"The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled." –Plutarch

What uses of technologies help you to learn in your classes at AUC? What uses of technology hinder you or dampen your motivation to learn? When I asked these questions of two AUC students, Basma Rady and Nourhan Hassan, in a recent CLT workshop, their responses were similar to those of their counterparts in U.S. universities (Meacham, 2007; Kvavik, 2005 quoted in Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Among the answers were that they learned "when the professor uses the PowerPoint, but in an interactive way," e.g., giving alternative explanations and responding to students' questions, comments, and performance. The students also find video clips helpful if they are kept short and simple, i.e., with a slow enough delivery for students to understand and a clear message that brings the lesson to life but does not need a lot of explanation by the instructor. What hinders learning for AUC students and those in the U.S is when the PowerPoint (or any other technological mode) **becomes** the lesson, with little or no interaction between students and instructor or explanation in a different way from what is already on the slides (Bowen, 2006 and Felder and Felder, 2006). In addition, when every word that the instructor uses in class is also written on a slide, students have a hard time to follow due to the density of the message, and this dampens the student's enthusiasm for the subject (Felder and Brent, 2009).

When designing lessons and courses to promote learning, it is helpful to focus on two things: the student and how to engage him or her in the subject at hand. Twenty-first century students experience technology in many facets of their lives and expect it in their classes, yet they favor a "blended" approach, consisting of "the organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary face-to-face and online approaches and technologies" (Garrison & Vaughn, 2008). The use of learning technologies in the classroom represents a powerful way to engage students, and there is much for an instructor to master, but even with very little experience, it is easy to introduce technological elements in limited parts of the lesson, practice, and add to one's collection and repertoire. The following are three key ways to employ the computer technologies and data shows available to us in classrooms at AUC.

Using PowerPoint presentations to focus information and create atmosphere. PowerPoint presentations have certain artistic features that can serve as an artist's palette for the designer/teacher and as a way of bringing images into a class to capture students' attention, arouse their curiosity, illustrate a point, and/or check whether they have prepared for the class. Images quickly and easily demonstrate key words and concepts, allusions, and metaphors that students may be unfamiliar with in their readings. For the visual learner, images enhance understanding and provide motivation to learn more. In addition to images, titles and bullet points focus the lesson and give it shape and logical sequencing. Prepared questions save time; key quotes from thinkers and from student work spark discussion and inspire them, and links to the Internet or other Multimedia sources provide a change of focus and pace within the lesson. The advantage of this tool is that after using it, one has it as a record of each class. PowerPoints can be saved and stored easily, tweaked, and reused again whenever necessary. They can also be posted on Blackboard for students to use in reviewing for tests or as models in creating their own presentations. The teacher can also take photographs of the stages of a complex class project (such as in Community-Based Learning), incorporate those photos into a PowerPoint, and share it with the class as a memento. This type of presentation also serves to illustrate the process to the next class to undertake such a project or task.

However, the PowerPoints should serve only as a tool and stimulus for learning. They may be, and often should be, abandoned if student questions evoke a face-to-face discussion or alternative explanations in class that serve the same learning purpose. If vital points are left out of one class, they can easily be cut and pasted into a PowerPoint for the next one. Be sure that all slides are clear (with at least 32-point font and good light/dark contrast between text and background) and concise (using phrases, not sentences, and no more than 5 or 6 words per line), and show simplicity over complexity, which needs discussion and explanation.

Engaging students with multimedia websites. Our Internet connectivity with data shows enables us today to bring the world into our classrooms as never before. From quick film clips from YouTube featuring the authors of texts you are teaching to interactive websites that allow students to guess what Stone Age tools were used for and check their answers, the Web is a treasure trove of engaging sites. You can collect these on Blackboard for you and your students to access each time you teach the course.

Encouraging creativity with student productions. When technology is used effectively by the instructor, students are interested in producing their own PowerPoints, multimedia videos, photographs, and other learning products. Giving oral presentations in pairs or groups using PowerPoint (often modeled on, and sometimes surpassing, those used by the teacher) encourages students to actively participate and express themselves in creative and individualized ways that promote learning. Their products can easily be published on Blackboard.

The time we have with our students is always limited, so we also need to engage them in arenas outside the classroom, such as on Blackboard or by creating assignments that challenge them to interact with their readings and with other people as they learn. However, the major arena of learning over which we as instructors and professors have the most control is the arena of the classroom, and the combination of human interaction with the technologies available to us therein can give us the means to kindle the fires of learning in our students and in ourselves.

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