

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN CREATIVE & COLLABORATIVE MULTIMEDIA CONTENT PRODUCTION An Alternative Form of Assessment

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Student-centered teaching and learning has gained tremendous popularity among faculty and students during the last two decades and many courses seek innovative ways in which students can enhance their own learning experience and gain new skills at the same time. The emergence of new and innovative learning technologies has also contributed to this process and there is now a plethora of academic courses that make use of several such technologies in the teaching process. Furthermore, higher education is also acutely cognizant of the importance of the various new skills required by students in order for them to secure rewarding employment after graduation. Along with the conventional skills of literacy, disciplinary knowledge, and communication, skills such as digital literacies, digital design and familiarity with Web 2.0 tools have become additional requirements. Nevertheless, faculty teaching in the disciplines do not have the time or in many cases the expertise to teach these new skills as part of their courses. Joan Lippincott (2007), however, argues forcefully that for such skills to be acquired by students they need to be integrated into the syllabus and enable students to acquire them while preparing multimedia content as part of their assignments.

This short essay acknowledges the importance of Lippincott's thesis and makes use of a **Classroom Action Research** (CAR) project in an undergraduate course at the American University in Cairo, in order to evaluate its application. The course, entitled "Social Problems of the Middle East" required students to produce multimedia content as part of their assignments and they were assessed on both the content and multimedia dimension for the final grades.

In order to achieve this objective the course was structured around a close collaboration between the faculty member teaching the course (Glavanis) a multimedia expert at CLT and the students. Appropriate Web 2.0 tools were identified and the assignments were designed to provide students with as much opportunity as possible to be creative in producing content that expresses their learning in the course. Furthermore, the multimedia expert provided Glavanis and the students with the IT support and the appropriate in-class training. He also ensured that students were comfortable using the Web 2.0 tools and found them "user-friendly". This collaborative experience has been monitored closely through a Classroom Action Research (CAR) project and which is reported below.

The objective of the CAR was to explore the use of a participatory and collaborative approach in which students were (co)producers of learning materials (via a wiki). A quick review of the existing literature showed that there were pros and cons in such a teaching strategy. In particular, previous studies found:

Pros: *Many educators argue that Web 2.0 tools provide richer and more engaging pathways to learn with great potential for facilitating student multimedia content creation, interactive information sharing, student-centered design and collaboration (Cochrane, 2010; McLoughlin and Lee, 2008).*

Studies suggest that students gain a better understanding of subject knowledge and develop transferable skills while using Web 2.0 tools (Lee et al., 2006).

Cons: *However, there are authors who believe that not all students may be familiar with technology (Crook et al., 2008; Kennedy et al., 2007) and with some questioning the ideology of Web 2.0 which they claim has not been seriously evaluated and has affected Pedagogy 2.0, resulting in its failure (Williamson, 2009). (Teaching and Learning with Plymouth University, 2012, p.3)*

Thus, the CAR had a base line from which to start the research and benchmark against. Given the limited space available this short essay will only produce the results (of the SGID? Survey?) in a summative form below.

1. Students displayed mixed perceptions of producing multimedia content. The majority enjoyed the experience of being challenged to work alone and create, while a minority felt it was a frustrating experience; this was particularly with a couple of mature students who noted, “As a mature student I felt extremely disadvantaged.”
2. Of those that benefited from the experience they highlighted the following:
 - a. Increased understanding of subject knowledge
 - b. Gained a sense of accomplishment
 - c. Enjoyed and benefitted from collaboration with peers – group work
 - d. Increased critical thinking skills and improved communication skills
 - e. Produced Iterative learning – “Can remember the course content better than if I had just written an essay.”
 - f. Had fun and enjoyed learning

In general we concluded that the experience was successful and worth repeating, while taking into account student comments. Thus, student collaborative multimedia content production as an alternative to traditional teaching and conventional forms of assessment was justified and is now being used in all my teaching.

How Students used Multimedia technology to Study Abroad while staying at Home

“Sometimes, when the place is dangerous or remote, a digital handshake is a viable path to global learning for college students.” (Cathy Youngmann, 2013)

Furthermore, in a different course where we collaborated via a wiki and Skype with Cabrini College, Pennsylvania, USA, to produce an award winning multimedia object (<http://youthvoicesrise.com>) additional benefits to those already noted above were noted. As Cathy Youngmann, my colleague at Cabrini argued, “It seems that providing students with the opportunity for [global education](#) experiences is currently a major initiative in higher education. The benefits of preparing college students to become global citizens through international contacts are obvious.” (Youngmann, 2013). Thus, communication technology and multimedia content production produces also real benefits when students are unable to travel abroad. Youngmann also notes that “the true learning excitement took place during Skype interviews with students in Cairo” and “my American students were quite moved by the personal life stories that their Egyptian peers shared during individual video Skype sessions.” Youngmann concludes that “This was an amazing experience for Cabrini students, who grew in their understanding of the Middle East, of Islam, of journalism, of technology and about the importance of stepping out of their comfort zones.” This also applied to Cairo-based students who were delighted with the experience and in particular that the final output was a website entitled, *Arab Awakening: A View from the Inside*, was awarded several prizes including the prestigious *2012 Pinnacle Award for Best Multimedia Feature Presentation from the College Media Association*, and became available as free e-book from iTunes.

In conclusion, it is possible to suggest from the above that collaborative student multimedia content production is a teaching strategy with potential for engagement and learning which also generates a variety of benefits for student learning. CLT provides both pedagogic and technical support for any faculty wishing to take on this challenge.

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