



Creativity and the Power of Two

HIIIE SAUMAA · MICHAEL CENNAMO · 26 OCTOBER 2016 ·

COLLABORATION

Running into each other on the Columbia University campus, we often chatted about books, teaching and learning, music, plants, Broadway shows, and our theories about how new ideas happened. We shared what inspired us and helped one another through life's challenges. During one of those discussions we started to imagine ways in which we could blend our fields of expertise and create innovative, imaginative, and educationally grounded projects that use technology in a way that would fit well inside a humanities classroom. We weren't sure how to start, but we wanted to try.

About the Authors



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Hiie

For years, I did not see a place for technology in my classroom: I was teaching writing and literature seminars, where the focus was on discussing texts and ideas or students' own writing. I had shied away from using technology in my classrooms also because I had not encountered meaningful, motivating assignments that involved technology during my own years as a student. However, in 2014, watching my group of nineteen students during class breaks, I saw that they were more connected to their iPhones than to one another. I got an idea for strengthening the community of the class by trying to make something together. I wanted to include more activities that tap into students' creativity and imagination. Could technology carve a space for projects that allow students to think and express themselves both creatively and critically and do so collaboratively?

In my search for more creativity, I was inspired by a different field – my training in sensory-based dance modalities, or dance somatics. In my movement classes, I include time for both choreographed moves and free dance. For self-expressive movement to occur, the space needs to be non-judgmental. My work in movement modalities has inspired me to view my students' education more holistically – to allow their different skills and strengths to be seen.

I wanted to explore writing – to break out from only assigning academic essays or reading responses. Writing is

such a potentially magical and transformative ground. Why not use other ways to write? I did not intend to do away with the academic essay — I wanted to incorporate other writing experiences. With my two sections of Literature Humanities, altogether 44 individuals, I saw an immediate potential for creative synergy: these two groups were covering the same material and could immediately serve both as creators and audiences for one another. I envisioned giving each student a chance to engage with the course texts by having a firsthand encounter with concepts such as speakerly voice, rhythm, meter, plot, and themes — key concerns that they had been discussing in the texts of the Western canon. Creative assignments could also extend student learning outside of the classroom and allow them to explore their campus setting or their city in light of what they were reading in class.

Michael

Because each teacher is so different, I think about my work as something where I can simultaneously follow a set of rules but at the same time be flexible. I see a classroom the same way I see a song or poem — it adheres to a certain structure, but it is also its own thing entirely. If I can clearly see where the limitations are, my creativity can be more focused.

I wanted to work on these ideas with classrooms of students, and teachers willing to experiment with those ideas and strategies. A lot is at stake for a teacher, as they are ultimately accountable for the outcomes of the course. Hiiie's decision to risk something prompted me to equally risk. I choose to be an equal investor in the class's success.

Hii wanted her students to be creators rather than consumers. These were students studying literature — being technically proficient was not a prerequisite. She wanted her students to work together; I therefore had to construct an environment conducive to community and collaboration.

We embarked on our quest for course goals by asking questions: If you had your druthers, how would you envision your “perfect classroom”? What do you want your students to go away with knowing? What do you want your students to be better able to do? The idea was that if we could “think backwards” and first understand what the goals were for the course, it would be much easier for us to visualize what a good outcome would look like. When we could see the outcome, it would become much easier for us to think about how we could assess that outcome. With an assessment strategy in place, it was then easier to think about the activities that we would want students to engage in. And then, only then, would we think about the technological tools to fit the activity. We wanted students to think, work, discuss, and create together — to teach each other and to learn from each other.

Do students even want to work together? If students were now expected to work together before and after class — would it frustrate them? Would group work create extra issues or problems? How would group work be graded? How would we know that everyone was contributing their fair share? We knew that if we were going to introduce technology and group work into the classroom, we were going to have to articulate their importance, and express to

students that working together and helping each other, as a community, would reap many more rewards than working individually.

What are the components of a “classroom community?” Why should students come together as a community, and if they choose to, what do they need from each other? If students need to be able to risk and trust each other in order to bring out their best, how do we ensure that this happens, in both our online and face-to-face environments? How can everyone in the course be a teacher of some kind? How can the work, rather than just being another assignment, be an opportunity for creativity, expression, learning, and most importantly, growth?

Our Projects

A teacher-centric classroom leaves little room for working together, teaching each other, and the risk that comes with true community. We strove to build a space where the presence of everyone — teacher, technologist, and student — would be known, felt, and respected. We aimed to create a student-centric experience, facilitated and orchestrated by an instructor, with technology as a tool to aid in the creative process.

We undertook two projects in two consecutive years of a required first-year “great books” course: a collaborative epic poem in [WikiScholars](#) and a multi-genre newsletter using [LucidPress](#).

In the long-form poetry project, or “[Our Epic](#),” each group of 4–5 students came up with 40 lines of original poetry

that echoed the themes and ideas of our course readings. The students chose the setting, the plot, and the characters of the poem. They chose how to begin, develop, and conclude the actions in the poem and how to interweave references to the characters, events, or ideas from the books we had discussed in the course. Each group continued the thread from where the previous group left it – each group thus relied on the creative output of the previous group and the entire class had to work together as a cohesive unit for the project to be successful. In the [Newsletter](#), we asked groups of 4–5 to come up with a written and a visual component that, again, engaged with the ideas from the course material. The visual component could be a video or talk from YouTube or original artwork or series of photos created by students themselves. The written component could be an interview, a review, a story, a poem. Through written and visual means, I wanted my students to find their own creative voices and look at the course materials using their imagination.

Our emphasis was not on training artists, musicians, and poets but encouraging students to use their imaginative and creative faculties, find their own voices, and improve their critical thinking skills. Our measurements for the success of these projects and the criteria for grading students' work were neither typical nor easy to fit into the backward design approach. Hiie has a number of assignments in her course for which she has very clear, measurable criteria – quizzes, academic essays, reading responses, midterm and final exams. The Epic project and the Newsletter were different in this regard. What we wanted to “measure” was creativity, expressiveness, and

imaginative thinking. These were the qualities we wanted to build.

Our work on these projects was in some ways akin to improvisation in the classroom. Improvisation and experimentation are forms in which the outcome is not fixed or certain – they involve a step by step unfolding, “[gifts of the moment](#),” as Chris Kreiser puts it, and being in the moment. Creativity asks for an environment that supports taking risks, both on the part of the students and the educator.

Trust was a key component in the students’ collaboration in their teams and our work. As Jesse Stommel has noted, “[Learning is always a risk](#). It means, quite literally, opening ourselves to new ideas, new ways of thinking. ... It means taking a leap, which is always done better from a sturdy foundation. This foundation depends on trust – trust that the ground will not give way beneath us, trust for teachers, and trust for our fellow learners in a learning community.” Can students jump into the creative unknown and be fine with the fact that there are no specific models and prompts? Can they trust one another, can they work together? These projects were designed to let the students explore and grow more independent and daring as thinkers and creators. And for us to grow more daring in embracing experimental teaching and confident in our own creative pedagogical ideas.

The outcomes of both projects were stunning: the richness of students’ imaginative engagements with the texts, the range of genres, and the depth and brilliance of their

insights. For example, one group in the Newsletter project, all males conducted [imaginary interviews](#) with female characters from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by Homer, *Medea* by Euripides, and *The Oresteia* by Aeschylus. Their work gave us a new, imaginative understanding of these female characters whose voices are often subdued or presented one-dimensionally in the literary works. “[Metamorphoses Rap](#),” inspired by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, made us all laugh and de-stress in class. Projects where students conducted [interviews with faculty members](#) who work on different national literatures in their [original languages](#) added a very valuable dimension of translation and cross-cultural contact to our class discussions. Students’ own [artwork](#), [videos](#), and [trailers](#) were not only breathtaking but also showed the students as original interpreters of ancient texts.

What did the students themselves think of these collaborative projects? From feedback at the end of both projects, we saw that students had found effective ways to collaborate and divide the tasks. They relied on a blend of face-to-face meetings and work online, using Facebook, text messages, emails, and Google Docs. The students noted that the projects allowed them to get to know one another better and as a result, the communal bonds grew. One student remarked, “Typically in class discussions it is difficult to get a true sense of their personality, but working in a small group and coordinating parts forced me to interact with classmates in ways I wouldn’t normally.” Another student observed that the Epic project was interesting because it was a new experience: “I have never taken a class which required me to use multimedia sources

(other than basic things like powerpoint and researching online), and it was a fresh idea to work online as a group.”

One student highlighted the fact that the Epic “exemplified team effort and collaboration in groups, which is a very important life skill” and “the spirit of creative collaboration and inquiry enabled us to establish rapport quickly, and it definitely made me feel closer to the class.” Another student pointed out that “[w]hile class discussions reveal the opinions of our classmates, they do not allow us to get to know each other the same way that working together does. ... It was great to see the talents of my classmates in settings outside of the classroom.”

Both projects increased their knowledge of the materials and allowed them to express that knowledge creatively. One student remarked, “[I]nstead of looking at the works from the perspective of a reader, we had the opportunity to try our hands as writers. Examining the styles and creative elements in works was a new and helpful angle to take that helped deepen my knowledge of the texts.” The students repeatedly pointed out that the projects relieved stress over grades and performance. One student mentioned that working on the Newsletter allowed him to present what he had learned and thought about the works through sketches rather than essays: “The time that Columbia’s rigorous classes takes up often left me with no time to engage in hobbies that I particular enjoy including sketching. The Newsletter, then, allowed me to do something I enjoyed and subsequently, made me Literature and Humanities experience less stressful and more pleasurable.” Another student echoed the sentiment: “Since being in college, I haven’t really found the time to

indulge in poetry like I used to in high school, so it was nice to be able to use the newsletter as a means of compelling me to delve into an interest of mine that had been waning.” Yet another student wrote: “I never expected to make videos for any of my class here at Columbia, but that was a huge interest of mine. It felt great to be able to put my interests into a concrete product.”

The students’ responses affirmed to us the value of such creative projects. The responses showed that students learned and used skills that are important not just for life but for their lives outside of the classroom: they learned something about working together, creating something together, and appreciating others’ input and vision. They saw their fellow classmates as expressive, creative beings. They learned to trust the creative process and take risks, for example by writing in genres and in a voice different from the academic essay with which they are familiar.

Teacher and Technologist Collaborating

What made our collaboration special is that we both brought out certain qualities in each other that we needed help with. This collaboration made us realize that an educational technologist does much more than set up technological tools. We did not have all aspects of the projects figured out before we started. We could dream, envision, and imagine together. Designing, executing, and writing about our joint projects was mutually inspiring. We found in each other a supportive colleague and friend with whom to talk about teaching and educational goals.

Our ongoing conversations and questions made us more self-reflective pedagogues and practitioners. We became more embracing of educational experimentation, but also critical, pedagogically grounded, and aware innovators.

The consistency of the dialogue, the reliability, and the expertise in a different yet related field were important in our collaboration. Both of us risked something; we were both willing to color outside of the box a bit, try something new, see how it went, and be willing to iterate. We didn't simply provide answers for one another — we started to formulate new questions. We learned how to ask questions based on another person's thoughts and experiences, not just our own. Above all, we didn't force our ideas on each other; we talked, plodded, and experimented with ideas until we saw a new way that we both loved and respected.

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