Media Scholarship
in the Liberal Arts

Hamilton College
Colgate University
St. Lawrence University

http://academics.hamilton.edu/mediascholarship/

Strategic Discussion

Through a two-year collaborative grant from NITLE on Media Scholarship in the Liberal Arts, faculty and staff from Hamilton College, Colgate University, and St. Lawrence University have been working to discuss the evolution of 21st-century pedagogies in relation to technologies, especially how they relate to student learning outcomes. During our discussions, we have considered the following:

The ubiquity of media in society necessitates that we educate our students to be both effective communicators with media and critical consumers of media. To that end, we have been gathering examples of best practices in the use of multi-modal assignments across the curriculum. These will be shared with faculty from multiple disciplines to assist them in the integration of media assignments into their courses and to provide strategies for assessment.

Faculty who have integrated media projects into their courses report that their students often engage more deeply with the material as they consider how to integrate text, sound, and images to synthesize and communicate ideas. Faculty and students report longer retention of knowledge through creation of media projects, which is attributed to the combined effect of both affective and cognitive learning by students as they create media-based projects [1]. As students create multimedia projects, they alternate between creative expression and critical interpretation, and ultimately they own and retain the ideas they communicate. Yet, this deeper engagement isn't free: there is a significant learning curve to be climbed by both students and faculty as they learn multiple technologies and the crafts of visual communication, storytelling, media analysis, and more. Both faculty and students report that media projects require significantly more time than writing a research paper. Successful integration of media projects requires collaboration between faculty and instructional technologists to structure effective use of technology with the learning goals. After assignment design, Instructional technologists teach the technology skills and are heavily utilized for one-on-one assistance throughout the project. Resource and presentation needs naturally bring in other academic support staff.

The issues outlined above are not restricted to the arts and humanities. We see a similar situation with the application of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) across the curriculum. Once the purview of geographers only, GIS has migrated to history, sociology and anthropology, political science, and other departments and interdisciplinary programs. This is due to the real academic merit of using this technology to conduct spatial analysis of data, revealing trends and correlations that are simply not discernable by other means. Again, we conclude that just as media literacy becomes a critical skill for our students to possess in order to be effective communicators, so too does spatial literacy hold the same potential. We also observe a crossover of these skills as visuals resulting from such spatial analyses are used as critical communication points in interdisciplinary media projects. Moreover, the parallels extend to the issues of faculty and student time, and increased support requirements for instructional technology staff. This begs the question: "How do these issues affect institutional planning for support of these enhanced curricula?"

Students constantly interact with technology through cell phones, iPods, Facebook, etc., often choosing to incorporate images, audio, and video as components of their assignments. One might assume from this that they are gradually acquiring an ability to evaluate critically content in all media forms, but students' first attempts at multimodal assignments have proven otherwise. We teach them how to critically evaluate, analyze, and produce high quality written work, yet we lack a parallel system for providing them the critical tools to successfully evaluate, analyze, and produce high quality multimodal projects for publication. As with developing writing skills over time, developing visual literacy skills over time makes a marked difference in improving both the level of critical analysis and the level of sophisticated/intelligent production.

In addition, faculty typically require increased flexibility in order to teach media-intensive and GIS-intensive courses, often taking the form of smaller class sizes or lighter teaching loads. Incorporating media-intensive requirements into courses requires a learning curve for faculty, and they need time to develop both their own critical understandings of this type of engagement, and how it will dovetail with their pedagogical approaches. Academic support staff need time to collaborate with students and faculty to develop these deeper learning opportunities.

In summary, we need to prioritize the numerous activities with which we engage our time and understand why this work is crucial to a meaningful liberal arts experience. All of us, among our administration, faculty, and staff, will need to raise institutional-level awareness, commit to strategic planning, and recognize the significance of 21st-century technologies on student learning and campus resources.

[1] "The use of the computer as a model, metaphor, and modeling tool has tended to privilege the 'cognitive' over the 'affective' by engendering theories in which thinking and learning are viewed as information processing and affect is ignored or marginalised. In the last decade there has been an accelerated flow of findings in multiple disciplines supporting a view of affect as complexly intertwined with cognition in guiding rational behaviour, memory retrieval, decision-making, creativity, and more. It is time to redress the imbalance by developing theories and technologies in which affect and cognition are appropriately integrated with one another.
From: Affective Learning — A Manifesto
R W Picard, S Papert, W Bender, B Blumberg, C Breazeal, D Cavallo, T Machover, M Resnick, D Roy and C Strohecker
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http://pubs.media.mit.edu/bttj/Paper26Pages253-269.pdf <http://pubs.media.mit.edu/bttj/Paper26Pages253-269.pdf>

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