

# Distant/Distance Learning

## The Use & Overuse of Technology in a Composition 101 Course

(An experience with technology by **Brian Baumgart**, Minnesota State University-Mankato)

### Overview:

In the spring semester of 2005, I taught English Composition 101 for the fourth semester in a row. But this was the first time as a hybrid course. Hybrid courses are a cross between online and classroom learning; in this case, it was a fifty-fifty split between online class and computer lab class.

This was also the first time I used Desire2Learn (D2L) as a course management system (previously, I'd used UCompass Educator and had a limited familiarity with WebCT). The primary purpose of this writing is to evaluate the experience of teaching a hybrid course using Desire2Learn and other technologies, as you will see.

### Desire2Learn:

The following sections explore and evaluate my personal experiences with the course management system.

#### A. Content:

D2L includes the option to save course material online for student and instructor access. This is an option I hope to never have to do without in any course. I save the majority of material I would normally hand out to students (or that some instructors would require their students to buy or make their own copies) on the system in “course materials” and “content” (both hold the same files, though they are organized differently). The benefits of this include: a) the opportunity to avoid making costly copies—printing is often cheaper; b) that students can access this information any time they have web access, which, in this day and age, is nearly constantly; c) that it's easier to edit electronic material than hard copies; d) that it saves time that might otherwise be devoted to copying, but can now be given to instructional design (i.e. teaching).

Specific files included on my site: syllabus (always available for the students who lose them or say, “I didn't know there was an attendance policy”); assignment sheets with specifics; example essays for students to peruse, but also for me, the poor instructor, to have easy access to in the classroom or online; and peer and self review questions—now they can revise any time they please!

#### B. News:

The “News” is a space on the opening page (“Course Home”) of the course site where the instructor can post notes or ideas. I use it primarily to make announcements (upcoming due dates and the like), outline class, and link to websites and specific files or sections of D2L for easier access. My biggest concern with this is that too much in

one little space can lead to students glossing over important information. I've begun to make step-by-step lists to help cut down on possible confusion.

### C. Discussions:

The "Discussion" Board is a section in D2L in which the instructor and students can have an asynchronous discussion about a certain topic. I set up topics for each of the major essays—sorting students into groups so they are not overwhelmed with too many posts—and for specific ideas I'd like the class to explore. While I'll admit I could use this discussion more effectively, I enjoy the opportunity to use them every once in a while. Primarily, they are used for:

- a. **Questions & Responses:** They can ask me or classmates questions, and the questions and responses remain on the board (unless I take them down) for the remainder of the course, so if they, or any other student, need to return to that question, they know where to look.
- b. **Course Evaluation:** I've set up a board where students can post directed or non-directed comments about the course or my teaching. I allow them to post anonymously so they can be honest and not fear reprisal.
- c. **Short Writing Assignments:** When I do not need a lengthy work submitted for grading (see "Dropbox"), the students can complete short writing assignments here, and others can see what they have written. This includes a concern with copying each other's work, but I only use this for ungraded assignments.

What I like about the "Discussion" Boards is that students can easily return to them for questions and answers, as well as evaluation. Why I do not use them often is because they are slow to use during a class period (see "Chat" for synchronous discussion).

### D. Classlist:

This lists the students in the class, as well as groups. I use this to see who is online (present) during our online portion of the course, though I'm disappointed that D2L does not have an option for recording attendance. Ah, back to the manual attendance book (I've used Excel & Access in the past for recording attendance, but the book works well enough, and it's useful in the face-to-face classroom, too).

### E. Dropbox:

The "Dropbox" is simple and wonderful. This is where I set up folders for students to submit electronic files of their essays and other assignments. When students submit, they can upload a file and also make any comments to me about their assignment. For example, I have students submit drafts of their essays so I can read them and make comments for revision; they can direct my focus (which I sometimes require) by stating in the notes, "I'm unsure how to conclude my essay. Do you have any suggestions?" or "I understand the Works Cited page, but could you give some hints about MLA in-text citations?" In addition, after I've graded or commented on their essays electronically, I can upload a file of their essays with my comments, as well as any extra notes or comments, back to the "Dropbox," and they can access the file any time after I've

uploaded it. This helps get their essays back to them sooner; we don't have to wait until the next time we meet.

#### F. Quizzes:

I decided to give quizzes on reading assignments in my Composition class after becoming certain a while back that many students weren't reading. Since I'm simply attempting to get them to read and retain some of the material, I mostly give true/false or multiple choice questions (in quizzes). Also, using D2L and those "specific answer" questions allows the program to grade them for me. D2L keeps track of which answers the students get correct and incorrect and sets up a graph for me of how well the students did on the quiz as a whole and on each question. I find this invaluable in determining which areas the students have trouble with. I, then, have more assistance discovering which instructional needs the students have.

#### G. Grades:

Ah, yes, the program helps calculate and keep track of grades. Students can view this to see how they are doing grade-wise at all times (as long as I keep up on it). Wonderful. Simply wonderful.

#### H. Chat:

Most instructors fear the chatroom. I know I do. Yet I've found it can be an invaluable resource in synchronous online courses. The "Chat" function is how I perform lectures and synchronous discussion. I discovered early on (after a horror story from a colleague who likened his experience controlling his students to that of trying to keep track of a flock of chicks in a henhouse—he'd get a few of them, but then the rest would run off in other directions, and when he'd gather those, he'd lost some of the ones he'd had in hand before) that there must be rules of behavior in a chatroom set *before* the students enter into your class chat for the first time. Luckily, I was able to do this. I set up Rules and Helpful Hints for Desire2Learn (Etiquette): a guide to behavior online and in the chatroom, specifically. (See this guide on page 5 in **Extra Materials**.)

I've also learned that though the chat is a helpful tool, we cannot rely solely on it. After only a few minutes, it gets old. Students have responded about headaches, boredom (when I ask a question and we all must wait until someone answers, or as we wait for someone to type something—including me), and becoming lost in the lecture/discussion. Two notes on this: 1) keep the amount of time in the chat limited to less than 15 minutes at a time; 2) if the lecture has long "sections" to it, type them out ahead of time and copy/paste into the chat—too much time typing loses students and wastes time.

The final reason I enjoy using "Chats" and other types of e-communication is that students who might not otherwise speak up feel less intimidated and more willing to take part in the course dynamic. It may also be true that we are then cutting out the participation of students who prefer the face-to-face format and talking. Is this then a

question of what we want from the students: Comfortable participation or personal interaction?

### **Other Technologies:**

In addition to the D2L course management system, I enjoy using other technologies, however minor, to assist in instruction.

### **Digital Photography:**

One of the essays I teach in my Composition Course is the Descriptive Essay. This essay involves, as its name implies, the detailed description of something. While I'm fairly open to what the students describe, I want it to be something the students can observe. Since time is an issue (especially face-to-face time in a hybrid course), I've begun to use digital media (photography) as examples for the students to describe in class. Although I use the photos as examples—they make up some details that cannot be found in 2-dimensional art—the students have the opportunity to use the photos for their final Descriptive Essay, as well. Maybe in the future I'll have them take their own digital photographs so they have an understanding of the context of the photo.

### **Video:**

While I've only used this myself as a minor part of class, I've given a course introduction with a video file linked to D2L from Minnesota State University's streaming server. As "extra credit," students have turned essays into video as well. I have a wonderful example of a student video of a fake television show for which they created an advertising campaign.

### **Demonstration/Simulation Programs:**

Certain computer programs, like TechSmith Camtasia Studio and Macromedia Captivate, have allowed me to create demonstrations of electronic editing and formatting on the computer. These can be saved (depending on the purpose and program) as video files, Flash files, and sometimes html web files. Currently, I've only finished a video file, which is on the streaming server, available for access at all times by my students (and anyone else who knows the URL). I used Camtasia (though Captivate is a more powerful program, we had tech issues with it this semester) to create a video demonstrating how to set up headers in MLA format using Microsoft Word. Personally, I love learning and using this technology, so the time I spent on it was not wasted, but it may take a while to "get it right," especially the first time through. In the long run, this will save me the time of demonstrating face-to-face how to set up the headers, but also this would be of phenomenal use in a strictly online class where the instructor cannot demonstrate while the students look on or follow along. Excellent for the self-directed learner. The following is the URL of the "Header" video on the streaming server:

<http://msustr0.campus.mnsu.edu:8080/cah/baumgb1/headerswm7.wmv>

## **Electronic Portfolio:**

This semester marks the beginning of e-folios in my classes. In the past, I'd used paper portfolios, difficult to find room for in a cramped office and painful on the back to lug around. Now, I use efoliomn.com, a free host to electronic portfolios that requires little to no technical knowledge (a little bit, but it took me fifteen minutes of class time to help the students set it up). While I'm not sure the long-term outcome of the e-folio, right about now at the end of the semester, I'm glad I don't have a bundle of paper portfolios blocking the door to my office. (See instructions for set-up on page 6 in **Extra Materials**.)

## **Final Note:**

Technology is a wonderful tool, despite what many naysayers might claim. But it is simply that—a tool. Not a replacement for teaching or coursework. English Composition is a writing course, and it must stay that way. I adore the advances in technology I've seen over the past decade (and earlier, too), and I'll continue to be inquisitive and driven in my quest to find useful and appropriate technologies without letting them take over the writing classroom.

## **Extra Materials**

### **Rules and Helpful Hints for Desire2Learn (Etiquette)**

1. It is a good idea to have your e-mail up during class in case I need to make an announcement outside D2L. Refresh and/or check often. You may e-mail me as well, though we do need to become comfortable with D2L as much as possible.
2. In Chats and Discussions, it is important to identify who you are responding to (especially in Chat), so direct statements or questions to individuals by writing their name(s) first. This includes me: Write "Brian..." when directing something to me.
3. If I type the letter "S," it means to **STOP TYPING**. I'm trying to get your attention with this. Please pay attention.
4. Since I cannot see your faces, expression, etc., we should try to be as organized as possible. In this sense, the equivalent of **RAISING YOUR HAND** is simply typing "???" When I see that, I will call on you by typing your name with a questions mark, for example: "John?" For those who share a first name, I might go by the last name or first & last initial.
5. When I give you a time frame for doing something, try to stick to it. You are responsible for your time and education; I simply assist.
6. Participation is required.
7. All electronic communication in this class should deal with the class and be professional. (Note: Although I might swear in the classroom every once in a while—don't worry, it does have a purpose—

- the computer can be less forgiving; you can actually be kicked out of D2L for inappropriate language.)
8. If I ask you to go to the Announcements or News, I'm simply referring to the main page of the D2L course.
  9. If you have any suggestions, comments, or questions, please let me know. This is both my course and your course; I want it to work for all of us.

### **Instructions for E-folio Set-up:**

(adapted from Kseniya Kareva, 2005)

1. Go to [www.efoliomn.com](http://www.efoliomn.com). Click on "Sign up" button. (Note: along the way, potential users are asked to accept the terms of use.)
2. On the next page, after having accepted the terms of use, you will see three options for different types of users: worker, student, or educator. Select the "student" option since this type of e-folio is better customized for students.
3. On the next page, provide your name, e-mail, username, and password. Copy down the username and the password as you might forget this information. Make sure you submit the request **not** at the same second as other students; otherwise, your request might fail.
4. In a few minutes (not immediately), check your e-mail accounts you have provided for opening an account with e-folio; there you will find an individual URL assigned to you personally; this URL includes your first and last name. For example, [edwardnorton.efoliomn.com](http://edwardnorton.efoliomn.com). This link can be shared with anybody interested in your work; through this link anyone can get to your portfolio.
5. Click on the URL sent to your e-mail account and log on with your username and password.
6. Once you have logged on, go to **Site Management** and then to **Design Center** to choose a template you like.
7. After you are done with the look of your personal e-folio, go to **Content Tools**. The following pages/links are available on each student's homepage: activities, education, events, honors and awards, projects, volunteer activities, work samples, and contact information. Each link, including home page, can be edited, moved, deleted, divided, renamed, and hidden. Depending on the content of the portfolio you are building, you can delete, rename some sections, and add subtitles if necessary since this show case provides some options that are not applicable to a writing course.
8. When you finish with the organization of your e-folio, edit pages by uploading files, cutting and pasting texts, or creating hyperlinks.