

Using D2L in the Classroom for the First Time

By Rachael Hanel
Adjunct instructor, Department of Mass Communications
Minnesota State University, Mankato
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Today's college students buzz around campus, cell phone in hand, iPod earphones clamped to the head, laptop tucked securely in the backpack. They connect without wires to the entire world via the Internet, new ideas at their fingertips. Technology not only has revolutionized their lives, but also the college classroom.

Faculty such as myself didn't have the world at our disposal when we went to college. Sometimes this new technology can be overwhelming and daunting. The tendency may be to ignore these strides and fall back upon our old, traditional practices when teaching this new generation of students. But to do so would be a mistake. This new technology opens up our worlds, too, bettering both us and our students.

I am an adjunct instructor in the Mass Communications department at MSU, and I decided to institute the Desire2Learn online program in my Editorial Process class spring semester 2005. I had never used D2L before, much less any type of online teaching tool. I never had the time to investigate uses of either D2L or UCompass Educator. Over the course of the 2004 fall semester, I heard more about D2L and its benefits from professors. Editorial Process was a new class for me; for the previous five semesters I had taught Introduction to Mass Communications. But now, with a smaller class composed of mass comm majors and minors, I decided to incorporate D2L as part

of my class. This capstone report, a requirement of the Faculty Teaching Certificate Program, will address five main areas – how I learned about D2L and how I created it for my class; its main uses in my class; how my students viewed my use of D2L; successes and failures; and ways I could improve it for next semester and beyond.

I enjoy technology's benefits, but I'm not on top of new advances. I'm not a computer novice, but I'm not an expert, either. Again, time usually is a factor. I save time by doing things the "old way." Yes, compiling final grades for a class of 240 took a lot of time, but I thought learning new technology would take even more time. The more I read about D2L, though, the more excited I became about its possibilities. Keeping track of grades online and posting discussion questions appealed to me. I also like to get students involved in class. I thought D2L might be another way to motivate students to participate.

Some members of my department set aside time over winter break to learn more about D2L. About five of us participated in a couple of different sessions. Here I learned the basics of D2L and the various ways I could use it in class. I enjoyed taking the sessions with professors in my department because training could be focused solely on how to use D2L to teach mass communications. For example, we were all particularly excited to use the feature that allows faculty to post news articles.

Creating D2L for class

After the training, I felt comfortable taking D2L into my own hands. I used extra time I had over winter break to set up Editorial Process on D2L. I found the process to be quite simple and easy. I submitted a request online, and soon the class was available for me to play with. I first created some basic news announcements – welcome to class, what students could expect to learn, my contact information, etc. I didn't post the syllabus on D2L per se, but I reiterated much information from the syllabus on that main page. I also posted some campus items on the calendar, such as dates for the Good Thunder reading series.

I next set up my content. As soon as I created any type of Microsoft Word document related to class, I posted it on D2L. I divided my course into six sections – copy editing, rewriting/editing, headlines, cutlines, photos and layout/design. This helped me greatly to “see” my class organized. I felt my class was more manageable when it was broken down into sections like this.

By the time I started my class in January, I had just these basics posted – a few news articles, some dates on the calendar, and just a couple of assignments on the content page. This was enough to give me a good start. As I said before, creating D2L went quite smoothly. Anytime I had questions, I simply sent an email to a couple of the trainers I worked with and they were quick to respond. I also found the on-line tutorials helpful and easy to navigate.

Uses of D2L in my classroom

I by far didn't use D2L to its full capabilities, usually due to time restraints. I teach just one class, and I'm also a freelance writer and online educator. I often found myself wishing I had more time to devote to D2L. However, I relied on it heavily and found it to be useful in a few main areas – content, discussions, grading and dropbox.

I used the “content” feature most every day. This is the area where instructors can post lecture notes, handouts and assignments. I found it a great way to manage my course. Mostly I posted Word documents, but I also used D2L to post PowerPoint presentations and photos. Each day, I directed students to the content page where they would download their assignment for the day.

I also used the “discussion” feature heavily. I like to get students involved as much as possible. This class is part of the mass communications department; I'm training future journalists, public relations and advertising professionals, page designers, etc. – people who will be involved in communicating and disseminating information to a larger public. Knowledge of the news and the world around them is integral to their future professions. Therefore, I tried to have as much discussion in class as possible that related to the “news of the day” and media issues. I never want to focus on such a narrow topic as editing. My philosophy is, if it makes the news, it's up for discussion. We had some in-class discussion at times about timely topics, but I relied on

the D2L discussion feature to conduct most chats about important issues. I think I posted a dozen or so topics for students to respond to. As an incentive, I gave them a point of extra credit for each post. Every topic I posted generated quite a bit of discussion, and I was pleased with the level of maturity and intelligence demonstrated by my students. Discussion topics ranged from media coverage of the Terri Schiavo case and Red Lake shooting, editorializing within a news story, the number of women in the media and journalistic access to polling places.

I also used D2L to manage the grades. I found this feature to be absolutely invaluable. Unfortunately, I think I made my grading method rather complex. For example, most tests were worth 100 points, but they constituted just 10 or 15 percent of the total grade. I'm not good at math and have no idea how to calculate that by hand. I didn't have to worry; D2L did that for me! I loved the grading feature. I simply told D2L that a test was worth 100 points but was only one-tenth of the total grade, and it did the calculations for me.

I also used the dropbox quite a bit. This was another valuable tool. When I gave an assignment, I let students either print it out and hand it in, or else they could use the dropbox feature. All I had to do was create a folder, and students could submit an electronic version of their assignment. About one-third of the class took this option. I had no preference. I don't mind marking up hard copies. However, I think marking up electronic versions worked a little faster. I'm a faster typist than I am a writer, and I

could type comments on their electronic assignments. It was quite easy, then, for me to submit the marked-up versions back to them electronically. It was an overall smooth process.

I used D2L to a lesser extent for some other items. I posted some news articles, but I found that this took more time than I had. I didn't use the chat feature at all; I think this would be a more useful tool if I were conducting this class entirely online. I used the glossary to a small extent. I like the idea of a glossary. In order to produce good mass comm students, it's nice to have vocabulary builders every day. I can see how other classes would find the glossary useful, too. Students learn new concepts and words in any class.

Students' perceptions of D2L in this class

About half of my 18 students hadn't used D2L before this class. This number surprised me. I figured today's students are on the cutting edge of technology and had used everything out there that's offered. My students were much less computer-literate than I had expected. The first couple of weeks I had to walk some of them through D2L and show them step-by-step how to download documents. They seemed to get the hang of it fairly quickly, though. I didn't feel as if this was "wasted" class time. My explanations didn't take more than a couple of minutes each time. I also offered individual D2L help to students if they needed extra attention. Many times we

encountered computer problems, so that was frustrating. Usually switching to a different computer or a different browser solved the problem.

I gave my students an informal survey recently to gauge how they viewed my use of D2L in Editorial Process. I had a good response; I suppose offering extra credit helped. All 18 students filled out the form. I enjoyed reading the responses very much and their unanimous positive comments surprised me. I expected to have some criticism, so I told students the survey was anonymous (they got the extra credit by signing their name on another piece of paper). Even though the responses were anonymous, not one student said anything overly critical. Some said they'd like to see improvement in some areas, but these comments weren't too harsh. I say I was surprised because at times I sensed some student frustration. D2L didn't always work well on some computers, and it didn't always work well with Internet Explorer, the main Web browser students use. I even had one student, after a couple of weeks of frustration in the beginning of class, say "I hate D2L!"

In this survey, I asked three questions:

1. "Did you find D2L useful in this class? If yes, what was the most useful? If no, Why not?"

2. "What would you like to see different about how D2L is used in this class?"

3. "How familiar were you with D2L before this class? If you weren't familiar with it, would you feel comfortable using it again? If you are familiar with it, would you like to see D2L used in all your classes?"

Students had many good things to say about D2L in this class. They liked seeing news about class posted on the home page. I used the home page especially to post any changes to the syllabus or to highlight what was coming up in future classes. I kept my printed syllabus quite fluid, since I had never taught this class before and wasn't sure exactly how it would play out. Of course, I made repeated announcements in class, too, for the students who didn't always check D2L. But I thought it was a nice addition and reinforcement to have electronic messages. If students were absent, they liked they could check to see what we did on a given day.

Students liked that I made presentations available on the content page. I put each PowerPoint presentation on D2L. I went over it in class, and I noticed that many students were following along on their own computers, rather than looking at the board. I didn't mind much, but I could tell some students were skipping ahead, so I have mixed feelings about this. But students said they liked it, especially if they sat toward the back of class and couldn't see the board well.

They also liked the easy access to assignments. Some students made comments that they liked the fact that trees were being saved. They seemed to like having fewer papers. I imagine students often are inundated with paperwork. I remember my days as

a student and the folders I carried that were bulging with handouts and assignments. I'm glad I could make a difference in reducing their paperwork load.

Many students liked the discussion feature. They liked being able to weigh in on the news and check out what their peers had to say. Sometimes I get the feeling that this generation is more comfortable communicating electronically. Students that wouldn't say two words in class are more than happy to post written comments. I had a wide variety of participation, but I think at least every student made at least one post to the discussion board.

Of course, not every student liked everything about D2L. Some students, while liking certain aspects of D2L, worried that if it was used too much, the personal aspect of the classroom would be lost. I thought this was a perceptive observation. As educators on campus, we must keep this in mind. If we want to teach solely online, it probably would be best to work for an educational system that focuses solely on distance learning. Students are on campus because they want personal interaction with both peers and faculty.

Here are some random comments from my students that give a better feel of what they liked and didn't like:

- "I had never used it, but it was very easy and I feel comfortable with it."
- "Less work centered around D2L – more visual in person or on board assignments because we use computers so much every day anyway."

- “I also like how we can upload assignments. It saves our trees!”
- “Not familiar – absolutely, it was easy to learn and use.”
- “I became a big fan of D2L my last two semesters when a speech professor of mine used it religiously. I think it is a wonderful tool for the teachers and students and it should definitely be implemented in all classes.”
- “I also liked having everything for the class accessible through the Web instead of carrying tons of paperwork around. I could check stuff out on the night before class at home or while I’m on campus.”
- “I’ve used D2L in one other class. I think it should be used in all classes. It’s better than having tons of paper handouts and it’s easy to access whenever a student needs it.”
- “I had never used D2L before this class and was nervous about it. I now feel very comfortable with the program and look forward to using it again.”
- “I would like to see D2L used in all my classes because I think it’s a very helpful tool.”
- “I think you have to be careful to not integrate technology too much into the classroom or you’ll lose the personal aspect.”
- “I had never used it, but now love it. It’s very user friendly. I wish all classes used it.”

- “The discussions on D2L were a lot of fun because I learned my classmates’ opinions on varied topics.”
- “I’ve used it in other classes but it was never organized in a way that correlated so well with in-class assignments, lectures, discussions, etc.”
- “I have used D2L before. I would like to use D2L again. But I would rather have all my classes use D2L or all of them use UCompass. It is hard to have to use both.”

I noticed the main student complaint was about the grading system. They didn’t like the fact that their overall grade at any time wasn’t a true reflection of their standing in class. If they missed a 5 percent assignment and only 20 percent of all assignments had been given, that missing 5 percent makes quite an impact on the grade. But missing just 5 percent out of the 100 percent total doesn’t do much damage. D2L always kept a running tally of the grades and always gave out a letter grade, no matter how many assignments had been given. The student who missed 5 percent out of 20 percent saw a big “C” glaring back at him or her. I had some students with Ds and Fs, and I worried that seeing those letter grades would concern them. I didn’t think that was reflective of how a student was doing. I explained the grading system to them shortly after midterm, however, and didn’t hear any verbal complaints.

Part of the criticism about grades also may have resulted from my actions. I didn’t always keep up with the grades as quickly as I should have. I needed a little time

to figure out the D2L grading system, and I didn't get the true hang of it until after midterm. Looking back, I should have made myself more familiar with this feature first.

Positive and negative aspects to D2L

Much like my students, I would say overall D2L was a success in my class. I feel D2L allowed me to do more things than normally I would be able to do. For example, if I wanted students to see a particular article, I would either have to make copies and hand it out or make an announcement in class directing students to the article or Web site. Instead, all I had to do was post a link to the article and have students check it out themselves. It took some of the burden off me and saved me time.

I liked being able to manage all aspects of my class in one spot. Grades, content and a class list were always at my fingertips. I liked the idea of using D2L anywhere. Wireless networks are more available; I could work on the D2L feature from anywhere on campus, local coffeeshops, or my home. I found this convenience to be valuable.

I, too, liked being able to save on paper. If I had to hand out every assignment to each of the 18 students, I would have used a vast amount of paper. Sometimes my assignments were two or three pages long, and I had many of them, especially in the first weeks of class where I emphasized grammar, spelling and AP style.

Yes, D2L took time to set up, but I never felt overwhelmed. The process of setting up my class on D2L was easy. I think our campus does an excellent job with tutorials

and informational sessions. After a couple of sessions and looking over the tutorials available on the Internet, I was ready to go.

As far as negative aspects, I mentioned the drawbacks of the grading system above. I also didn't find a good way yet to calculate extra credit. I spent some time investigating this aspect, but was not successful in finding a solution. This is an issue that probably demands talking to a D2L instructor in person.

As I said before, I found the uploading process to be easy. Sometimes I was posting large files (pictures, mostly) and as a result the uploading process took considerably more time. At times I found the process tedious. But I think making extensive copies would have been tedious, as well.

Future uses of D2L in my classroom

So what would I change in the future? My time availability, mostly. The possibilities of D2L are endless. I would have liked to use a few more features. I didn't post nearly as many news articles as I would have liked. I didn't use the calendar to write down class assignment due dates. The chat feature would have been useful, but I think that would have been more useful if my class was operated solely online. As I already said, I would have spent more time figuring out the grading feature.

One feature I didn't use at all that I wished I would have was the quiz feature. I gave a few pop quizzes in class about current events, and I always handed out those

quizzes on paper. D2L has a great system set up to give quizzes, but that would have taken quite a bit of time to initially set up. This feature allows instructors to have a question bank. That way, when students take the quiz on D2L, their questions will be different from the questions given to the students sitting next to them. This reduces the possibility of cheating. Also, D2L does all the grading, which greatly appeals to me.

In conclusion, D2L was a valuable asset to my teaching this semester. I look forward to expanding upon what I've done this semester. Over the summer I plan to spend more time learning about D2L. D2L has made me especially interested in the concept of online teaching. Currently I am investigating possibilities of what distance education has to offer. I think it's an exciting field, and I think my experience with D2L hopefully would put me on the cutting edge. I can see how D2L could be used to hold a class entirely online. I've made it known to my department chair that I'm interested in teaching online classes. I would like to see MSU expand into this direction. I realize the core of this university's essence remains on campus, and I wouldn't want to see that changed. However, I would like to see MSU offer anything that would be of benefit to students and their busy schedules. I think distance education, especially the use of D2L, benefits not only teachers such as myself, but also students.