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An Old Dog Learns Some New Tricks: Ready to Embrace Online Learning with Collaborate

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Winthrop University

An Old Dog Learns Some New Tricks: Ready to Embrace Online Learning with Collaborate

I have been somewhat of an online-learning skeptic. While no Luddite, I have been reluctant to give up the face-to-face interaction with students that the traditional classroom allows. The classes I teach in literature and critical thinking do not lend themselves to an online environment, I have always thought.

And then last week happened.

I was with one of the first groups on campus to receive training in Blackboard Collaborate, an addition to Blackboard that Winthrop now has. I spent two hours on Thursday in the TLC office, alone, but virtually with a trainer from Blackboard, as well as with Kimarie Whetstone, our new Director of Online Learning, and four other Winthrop colleagues. Then I spent two hours with the same group on Friday. This time, I was sitting at my kitchen table in Charlotte.

Both times, I was in class.

And it really felt like I was "in class." We were all in the same virtual room. We could raise our hands and be called on. Since we all had headphones and microphones, we could talk to each other. Those of us who turned on video cameras could be seen. We broke up into groups and did work in breakout rooms. We could learn from PowerPoints and Word documents, and we could watch YouTube videos and surf the web together. The class was recorded, so a student who missed class could play it back, and students who wanted to review could play it again.

The four hours of instruction was as "real" as any learning I have encountered, and my mind was racing as I thought about the ways Collaborate could be used to teach literature and critical thinking.

Collaborate got me ready to venture fully into this brave new world.

Those who were early

adopters of online learning may not understand the reluctance that many of us still have. I have been teaching since 1977, when classroom technology meant 16 mm film projectors (oh the joys of threading film in those sprockets!), purple mimeographs (I can still smell that ink), and chalkboards (several generations of students do not know the joy of going outside and clapping erasers). I feel somewhat like my grandfather, who used to talk about going from horse and buggy days to watching men land on the moon.

And I have been burned by attempts at online classes. A few years ago, when we first got Blackboard, I had a graduate class in critical theory that met Thursday nights for three hours. Some of the students came from other towns and cities, including one student who drove in each week from Greenville. She was also seven months pregnant. I was intrigued by the idea of an online class meeting, so I gave it

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a try.

I sat at my kitchen table in the university area of Charlotte, 35 miles from campus, and logged in a few minutes before 6:30. Students started logging in, but not all of them. I got email from three of them at about 6:40, saying frantically that they could not sign in. Two of them finally made it—and three or four other students never made it at all. Those of us who did make it to virtual class managed to have a “discussion” with the chat tool, but all of us found the three hours exhausting. The exclusion of four or five of my 12 students was demoralizing—and the soon-to-be mother was among the missing! Since class met only once a week, one whole week of class was partially wasted.

So I have been quite reluctant to try again. Our new platform makes me willing to give it another try. I am not planning a completely online CRTW class next semester, but since I had already registered it as a hybrid course, I am going to try to hold some of our class meetings online. As many of us are doing, I am using podcasts, vodcasts, class blogs, class discussions, and other online features available in Blackboard, and I have been pleased

with those pedagogical changes. My classroom is somewhat flipped. (Now if I could only get the students to listen to the podcasts and write the blogs regularly. Some things never change. In 1977, I was trying to motivate high school juniors to bring their books to class...)

Collaborate offers more than an online classroom experience. I plan to start using it for office hours, and it could also be used for advising. Fewer and fewer students seem to visit me in my office these days, so it might help them and me if we could meet at a time and place convenient for all of us.

And how about committee meetings? It seems to get harder every day to find a way for five to ten people to meet in the same room at the same time. I think this new platform will make it possible for us to get committee work done when time and space become a problem. Collaborate, indeed.

Kimarie Whetstone is offering training sessions for Collaborate, two two-hour sessions. I highly recommend that training. I expect those slots to fill quickly...

All that said, and as excited as I am about the

new platform and its possibilities, I am not ready to give up the traditional classroom. While we may be able to cover the same content and even talk to one another and see each other in an online setting, there are so many aspects of the classroom experience that can’t be replicated. The look of interest (or boredom) on a student’s face. The look of puzzlement that tells me I need to clarify my point. That moment when sudden illumination comes. The spontaneous sound of group laughter. The mass groan at one of my stupid jokes or puns. The sight of students hard at work on a problem. The sound of pens and pencils scratching across notebook paper. The chaotic buzz and babble of student groups at work on a project. The greetings before a class starts, the waves goodbye as we leave for the day.

Not quite ready to give that up. But ready to take a few more steps into the brave new world.



Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

We also thank those of you who have attended TLC sessions. Your time is valuable, and we appreciate you taking some of it to enrich yourself through professional and personal development.

A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

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and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

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The 2nd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

The call for papers and presentations for our Second Conference on Teaching and Learning, Saturday, January 31, 2015 is posted on the TLC webpage. Deadline for proposals is December 1, 2014. Come join us for a great day of teaching and learning!

Thought For the Week

“There is nothing that saps one's confidence as the knowing how to do a thing.”
--Mark Twain