

Online Utopia

Enhancing Collaboration through the Web

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Creating a collaborative environment in our university classrooms is not a new idea. From the birth of the modern educational system, educators and scholars have been actively looking for ways to transform teaching and learning from a solitary, individual-based endeavor into a productive, collective experience.

The growth of the Web over the past decade, however, has placed new stock in the concept of collaboration. What tool could be more powerful for facilitating collaboration among students, instructors and scholars than a networked medium that, by design, is hybrid and participatory? And indeed, what skills could be more valuable in the present information economy than the ability to share information among a community of peers across time and space? These features of the Web have made it a popular tool for educators and scholars alike and have spawned renewed interest in the use of collaboration to enhance pedagogy.

Over the past year, the technology specialists at the ITS Faculty Technology Center (FTC)--Keith Adams, Richard Malenitza, Ethan Ehrenberg and I--have been working with instructors, faculty and

scholars to promote the use of web-based technologies in teaching and learning. In the course of our work, the theme of using the Web to enhance collaboration has been a constant. As we have learned, however, the meaning of collaboration changes substantially from project to project. While the use of web-based technologies often culminates in a course website or the hosting of a live chat online, to call these ostensibly similar results the same would be misleading. The form of the collaboration, the use of technology, and the degree of integration into the educational curriculum determine, to a large extent, the success or failure of an educational project. A whole set of intangibles drives the collaborative process; the use of web-based technologies often serves to highlight this fact.

In my own experience, integrating technology into a broader pedagogical process lies at the forefront of any discussion of teaching and technology. While I do not claim to have any definitive answers as to the best way to go about doing this, the approaches developed by projects supported by the Faculty Technology Center have addressed many of the issues raised by the use of web technologies in higher education. One example that I would like to discuss in detail here is a recent project pursued in collaboration with Dr. Kathleen Hull, an NYU instructor.

Dr. Hull's project demonstrates the potential of rethinking collaboration in the classroom through the use of technology and supports recent research in higher education which claims that certain types of collaborative projects can produce powerful learning experiences for students. These collaborations challenge students to rethink the nature of the individual and of the collective and, in so doing, to consider how the full realization of an idea often depends on a supportive community or a social continuity of thought--a lesson that is particularly valuable at a research university such as NYU. This past spring, Dr. Kathleen



Fig. 1 A vision of Utopia from Dr. Hull's course: "Utopian Thought of the 19th and 20th Centuries."

Hull presented a proposal to the Faculty Technology Center staff for her undergraduate course, "Utopian Thought of the 19th and 20th Centuries: the Search for an Ideal Society in the West." She wanted to create a course website in collaboration with her students that would be an online Utopia, modeled after a series of micro nation websites mentioned in a report on cyber culture in the New York Times.

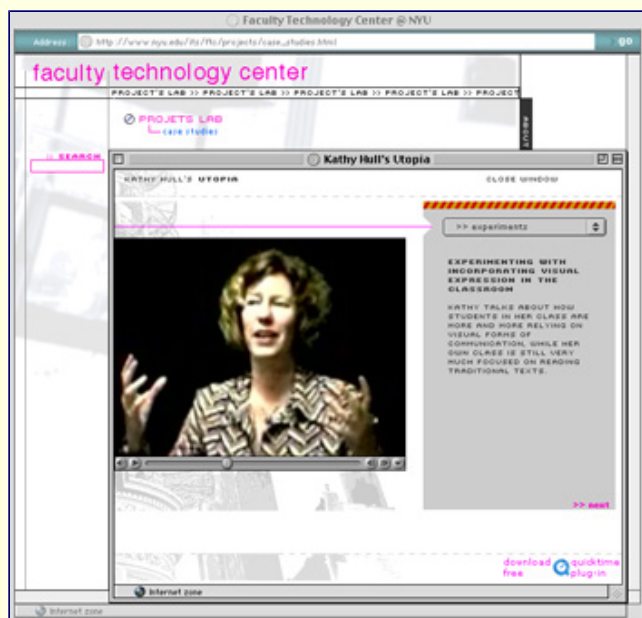


Fig. 2 A case study of Dr. Hull's project, with videotaped interviews, is featured on the FTC website: www.nyu.edu/its/ftc/projects/case_studies.html.

Dr. Hull wanted to take the idea of an online Utopia further and to adopt it for pedagogical purposes, but was uncertain of how to proceed while also preserving the course's original focus on the critical analysis of primary texts in Utopian thought. Could shifting the course focus from the traditional academic format of reading, writing and discussion to the collective production of an online space enhance the learning process? Furthermore, could students be trained to produce scholarly work in a medium other than the conventional thesis paper? What set of skills would students and instructors need to gain, and would the time and energy dedicated to gaining these skills come at the expense of more traditional academic activities?

In our initial conversations, Keith Adams and I assured Dr. Hull that building a website was feasible, but warned her that the hard part would be integrating it into the curriculum. After considering various options, we agreed that the finished website would be secondary in importance to the process of developing it.

Indeed, the idea of 'process' became the organizing principle of much of our future discussions. What could be a better illustration of the problems and possibilities of Utopian thinking than challenging students to engage with

Utopian ideals and to struggle with implementing them in a group setting? The production of the website could serve as an important vehicle for this activity. For our part, we would try to find ways to document our activities in order to better reflect on the project's successes and failures and to develop a more formal understanding of collaboration in the educational process. Students would be asked to do the same as they devised a method for working together to produce the online Utopia.

The course readings, discussions and assignments would allow students to gain a broader understanding of Utopian thought throughout history and would inform their own class project. Together, academic- and production-oriented activities would complement each other. Students would be asked to make arguments to the group for their vision of the online Utopia, predicated on the broader context of Utopian visions for collaboration and society building presented in the course readings. Once the course structure was agreed upon, we were able to advise Dr. Hull on the possible avenues for pursuing her project. The course was organized around traditional classroom sessions and a series of lab sessions. The lab sessions would allow students to have direct access to multimedia software as well as an opportunity to share any computer-based work with their peers.

The website would tentatively be produced without course management software so as to allow students and Dr. Hull the most amount of flexibility to implement their vision. It would also be a publicly accessible site. This decision was based on Dr. Hull's hope that the promise of publicity would motivate students to produce stronger academic work and create a public resource to further the academic study of Utopian thought. In addition, she wanted to take the class' scholarly activities out into the public sphere. The public nature of the Web might, she hoped, make the issues of social criticism inherent in Utopian thought relevant to communities outside the University.

As the course progressed through the fall, we conducted a set of mid-semester video interviews with students. Our aim in doing this was two-fold. First, we hoped to use video as a focusing tool to review student reactions to collaborating on the website. Second, we also thought that, given student interest, the interview could be incorporated into the online Utopia.

Unfortunately, the students' fascination with appearing on video took precedence over thoughtful, scholarly discussion. The positive result of the video interviews was a re-evaluation of the nature of the writing assignments planned for the course. We realized that the undergraduate students needed more narrowly defined assignments to force them to support their ideas about Utopia-building with more careful analysis of the thinking behind their own ideas in relation to classic Utopian texts. Furthermore, we began discussing other instructional opportunities for the use of video, including the notion of giving students an assignment to

establish a script for a video essay.

Dr. Hull's ongoing attempts to reflexively document the collaborative process has allowed us to begin constructing a dynamic model for improving course pedagogy through reasoned feedback and managed reflection. In an example of this process at work, Dr. Hull was able to note that although lab sessions were initially effective in helping the students become familiar with NYU resources for multimedia production, they became less useful as the course progressed. She realized that class time provided valuable structure and focus for student interactions, but that the less formal framework of the lab sessions would be better utilized as an opportunity for students to pursue more focused and individualized work.

The course has raised new questions surrounding the use of web-based technologies to encourage classroom collaboration. While instructors have a long tradition of teaching analytical skills in response to older media forms like literary text, they have virtually no precedents for doing this in response to web-based media.

Dr. Hull's ongoing documentation and reflection of the Utopia course's development has forced us to consider the types of critical skills students need to develop with respect to web-based media. As a result, Dr. Hull devised an assignment in which students are asked to compare two websites on Utopian themes and to consciously think about what criteria would make this comparison possible. For example, what are the various genres of Utopias on the Web, and how can they best be evaluated from a scholarly perspective?

In terms of the collaborative process, students in the course had very little experience in thinking analytically about working with others to produce knowledge. In the classroom, students with more web production experience have, at times, taken charge of the process. Their experience, no doubt, benefits the class but, at the same time, restricts the development of a more group-based perspective on the design and production process.

Indeed, not all forms of collaboration are the same. If Dr. Hull's course on Utopian thought provides any indication, people throughout the ages have had visions for the ideal society that have informed the many ways in which they have worked together and used technology. While far from conclusive, Dr. Hull's experiment with producing an online Utopia provides a dynamic model for web-based collaboration in undergraduate education.

To learn more about this project as it develops, please visit the "Case Studies" section on the Faculty Technology Center website at: www.nyu.edu/its/ftc/projects/case_studies.html.

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