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This chapter describes successful assignments that made creative use of laptops in writing, literature, and public speaking courses. Some activities moved the session out of the classroom to outdoor locations.

Laptops in the Humanities: Classroom Walls Come Tumbling Down

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When Clemson University's College of Engineering and Science began its pilot laptop program in 1998, the organizers made a courteous nod to Communication Across the Curriculum by selecting a few English faculty to participate. The success of the English courses surprised faculty from the technical disciplines, who didn't expect laptops to make much difference in the humanities. What the laptops did was increase opportunities for and forms of communication, bring mobility to other physical and virtual places, open the door to more innovative assignments, and fully engage students who professed to hate English. More recently, I have found the same success in teaching public speaking. For my students and me, the classroom walls came tumbling down.

Composition I

The first laptop course I taught was Composition I in fall 1998. I began brainstorming ideas for laptop assignments with two other laptop faculty members, William Park in general engineering and Bernadette Longo in English. We met regularly to share ideas and offer support to one another as we prepared to embark on this new journey. We were excited but we also had reservations. We believed we would successfully integrate laptops into our classes, but we also knew the potential for failure was present. Although not every assignment I made that first semester or since has worked exactly the way I planned, many were successful.

Nature and Technology in the South Carolina Botanical Garden.

One of the most successful assignments in first-year composition was an assignment I gave to the students for the second day of class. The concept I wanted to teach was perspective. But I also had other goals in mind that I wanted to incorporate: for students to experience Clemson in a way that was unlikely to be how they had already experienced it on their own, to discover nature and how their work in technical disciplines affects nature, to hone their observation and writing skills, and to effectively and efficiently use computing services at Clemson.

I had the students form teams of four, and together we rode the Clemson Area Transit to the South Carolina Botanical Garden. Each team had to agree on one place where technology and nature collide; then each student on the team chose his or her own perspective. From this individual vantage point, the students recorded their observations on their laptops and took a photo of their perspective. They also took photos of one another sitting in their positions and using their laptops. The next class period, back in the classroom, each individual wrote a descriptive essay based on his or her observations. After reviews and revisions, the students posted their essays and photos to their individual Web pages and then made links to their teammates' pages.

We all enjoyed seeing these clearly illustrated examples of how four people with the same goal can look at the same thing and see something different. One member of a team had a spider drop onto his keyboard, but of course none of his teammates saw the spider. On another team, one student saw a lizard run into the site the team had chosen, though the other team members did not see it. Every student realized that others have their own perspectives. We used this experience to discuss the importance of others' perspectives. As we progressed through the semester and undertook various team assignments, minority students more assertively voiced their perspectives; nonminority students more actively sought minority perspectives and were more willing to really listen to those perspectives. Students even appreciated learning how to ride the transit system and finding a quiet place to study (the Garden). They reported that this was their favorite assignment because by the first week they knew three people in the class, were familiar with their laptops, knew how to make Web pages, and learned an important lesson about perspective they could apply in all their classes in which team projects were assigned.

"Kew Gardens" by Virginia Woolf. For another successful first-year composition assignment, the students used the 1928 edition of the short story "Kew Gardens," by Virginia Woolf, and one of their texts, *Visual Communication: A Writer's Guide*, by Susan Hilligoss. After reading "Kew Gardens," the students complained that the story had no plot, that it was not a real story. They did not understand what Woolf was saying or why she wrote the story. To help them begin to understand the story, we visited the South Carolina Botanical Garden to observe the activity in a garden and try

to identify with Woolf. Students captured their observations on their laptops and in digital and print photos. As we left the garden, several students reported, "I get it now."

The next part of the assignment took place in the classroom. First the students formed teams of three. Using the Hilligoss text as their guide, each team evaluated Vanessa Bell's illustrations in the 1928 edition of "Kew Gardens." They posted their evaluations to our course management system and then orally presented their evaluations. After fully discussing their experience in the garden and Bell's illustrations, I asked the students to select a portion of text (any length) from the story and, using the Hilligoss text to guide them, create a digital page with that text. I purposefully did not give them an example to follow or much direction. I wanted them to develop their own insights and how to express those insights digitally. The last part of the assignment was to write a process-and-purpose essay, which explained their process for developing the new page of "Kew Gardens" and articulated their reasons for each decision they made, citing Hilligoss at least twice.

Their results were remarkable, some of such high quality that my words of praise were entirely inadequate. The freedom I gave them to create and the combination of laptop convenience and software unleashed their talents and motivation. One student used Adobe Photoshop to layer his selected text, two photos he took in the garden, and a graphic of a dragonfly from the Internet with an added shadow he created. His digital page and accompanying essay made clear he had internalized "Kew Gardens" to discover its nuance of meaning in his life. By the time the students finished this assignment, they all reported that they truly understood Woolf's purpose in writing the story and that they would always remember the portion of text that it turned out held personal meaning for them.

Habitat for Humanity Homecoming Build. Every Homecoming, Clemson University students build a home for a neighbor in need of a decent place to live. The house is built on campus and moved to its permanent location on the Monday following Homecoming. In fall 1998, Habitat for Humanity advisor Chris Heavner came to my first-year composition classes to tell the students about the student chapter and the Homecoming Build. He explained his need for three PowerPoint presentations: one he could use to solicit funds from major donors, one he could use for a presentation at the Kellogg Regional Conference, and one he could run on a laptop inside the house during Homecoming Weekend.

On the basis of the information they received from Heavner and their own research, the students worked in teams to create the three PowerPoint presentations. They spent one class period helping build the house so they would have a better understanding of their topic, see teamwork illustrated in a community environment, and feel a part of this wonderful Clemson tradition.

They used their laptops in class to develop, review (with Heavner participating in the review), and revise their presentations in class. An

unexpected result of the assignment was a new logo for the Homecoming Build at Clemson. Student Jeff Moreland created the logo by combining the Clemson Tiger Paw with the Habitat logo so his team would have an appropriate graphic in their PowerPoint. This led to an additional learning opportunity because the students had to obtain permission from Clemson University's athletic department to use the Tiger Paw. The permission they obtained covers use of the logo for all work associated with all Habitat houses that Clemson students build.

In addition to their PowerPoint presentations, students wrote and produced public service announcements that encouraged community financial contributions; they aired on a local radio station during the week before Homecoming. Students reported that they learned a lot about registered trademarks and copyright law, writing for various media, and working for a client. They also enjoyed the opportunity to contribute to the community.

Cloud 9 by Caryl Churchill. This assignment involved students from three laptop sections of Composition I: one taught by Elisa Sparks and two taught by me. We formed teams across sections with the expectation that students would work together primarily online via the course management system. The students' assignment was to design and develop a thorough Web site on the play, which was performed at Clemson University's Brooks Center during fall semester 1999. The play is difficult to understand, and nearly all students in first-year composition had assignments based on the play. The Web site, entitled "Engineering a Play," was used by other instructors (primarily graduate teaching assistants) and their students to help everyone grasp how a play is engineered and understand the content of this particular play.

The thirteen teams focused on backstage, set design, lighting design, sound and music, Churchill and play context, costumes, actors, director, smart things students have said about the play, censorship and reception of the play, rehearsals, basic building blocks of the play (plot, character, and theme), and Web masters.

The students used e-mail to communicate with team members in other sections and their resource contacts, such as Mark Charney, the director of the play. They used the course management system to share files. Peripherals that the students used were digital cameras (taking photos of the actors, the stage, props, lighting, and rehearsals) and scanners to put the costume designs online. Students successfully completed the Web site and learned a lot, but we had a difficult time managing and grading the project. Students complained that Sparks and I did not always give the same answers to questions and that conflicts arose between team members from different instructors' sections. A project of this type is certainly not for the faint of heart. I might try cross-section projects again, but if another instructor is involved I will split the project up differently so each team's members have the same instructor; only then can they hear the same message and be graded by just their own instructor.

Electronic Portfolios. I began assigning e-portfolios in spring 1997, before I had the luxury of having laptops in class. That fall, converting the assignment to a laptop assignment to be worked on in class was easy. The e-portfolios are due at the time of the final exam. Students give me the URL for their online e-portfolio published on their Clemson University homepages and a CD of the files to aid my grading. The portfolio documents the student's academic achievements (not just English), employment, volunteer work, and extracurricular activities. Reflections on student achievements, what they have learned, how they have matured, and their goals are important elements of the e-portfolios. Students reported that they were surprised to discover how much they had accomplished, learned, and matured in such a short time. I noticed, and they reported, an increase in self-esteem in their reflections.

Composition II

Building on the success of my laptop sections of Composition I, I prepared laptop assignments for my spring semester classes of Composition II. Most of the assignments made typical use of the laptops in class to write, review, and revise research papers and submit them by way of the course management system. However, one assignment was new and particularly successful.

The South Carolina Botanical Garden Nature-Based Sculpture Program is a unique opportunity for Clemson University students to work with a visiting artist to help install a nature-based sculpture in the garden. Each year, an artist is invited to spend the month of February designing and installing a nature-based sculpture. To date, twelve artists have installed these ephemeral nature-based sculptures in the garden. My Composition II students attended lectures by visiting artist Karen McCoy; interviewed her, the garden's cultural programs director Ernie Denny, and landscape architecture professor Frances Chamberlain; researched rammed-earth techniques and local history that McCoy requested; worked alongside McCoy to help install the sculpture, documenting their observations in a journal and digital photographs; and completed a writing assignment about their experience.

The writing assignment involved reading and evaluating their hometown newspaper for one month, determining where they might be able to publish an article on the sculpture program in the newspaper, contacting the editor of the paper to arrange publication of the article (or a letter to the editor), writing the article or letter, submitting the article (some with photos) or letter to the newspaper, and submitting the published article or letter to me for additional points. In a class of twenty students, fourteen were successful in getting their work published. Newspapers in Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Georgia, and South Carolina ran student-written articles in the Lifestyle or Travel sections or letters to the editor. Several included photographs; one article ran on the front page of the Lifestyle section with two color photographs. The convenience and efficiency

of the laptop in recording and storing information and for necessary communication, in addition to writing the article, made this laptop assignment a success for my students.

Contemporary Literature

In my contemporary literature classes, I used the laptops in conjunction with the course management system in some common ways: daily online reading quizzes, essay submission, grading, and so on. But I also developed several assignments beyond those standard uses, one of which—poetry projects—was quite successful in terms of content retention and fun.

To begin the poetry section of the course, we watched a 1987 documentary, *The Beat Generation*, hosted by Steve Allen and directed and produced by Janet Forman. After some discussion, the students grouped themselves into pairs and selected a Beat poet on which to focus. Their goal was to develop an informative and entertaining evening on the Beat poets in collaboration with Linda Dzuris's carillon students. As a class, the students chose the title for their event: "All Along the Bell Tower: An Evening of Carillon and Poetry." In class, the pairs researched their selected poet, developed a PowerPoint presentation, reviewed one another's presentations, and made necessary revisions. They also decided as a class the order of the presentations and planned the attire and refreshments to emulate a coffee house of the Beat Generation.

With all of us dressed in black, wearing sunglasses, and some wearing berets, the event began at dusk with the carillon students' concert in the Tillman Hall bell tower. Below in the amphitheater, my students prepared for their presentations. When darkness fell, my students presented the results of their research. Projecting their combined PowerPoint work on a large screen, they provided a brief biographical sketch of the poet and read at least one poem that they then analyzed. Passersby stopped to have coffee and listen to the presentations. Recently I talked to some of the students in that class; without exception, they tell me all about the poet they presented and the Beat Generation in general.

Public Speaking

After teaching composition and literature laptop courses for two years, I was asked to teach a laptop section of public speaking. I have found that using laptops daily in public speaking is much more difficult than in the writing and literature courses I taught. For starters, when students are giving presentations or a speech they need the undivided attention of their peers. Laptops have proven to be a nuisance on those days, and I have to tell students to shut their laptops unless they are assigned to critique the peer speaker. Every speaker is critiqued by four peers: two thoughtfully complete an online evaluation form, and two give immediate oral comments (two

things the speaker did well and two things the speaker needs to improve). Only those four students may use their laptop to take observational notes. I find having to enforce this classroom policy embarrassing (Why will they not pay courteous attention to their peers?) but unfortunately necessary. Three laptop assignments in public speaking merit some explanation.

What Did I Do Wrong? What Should I Have Done Instead? This in-class assignment is fairly simple. Before class begins, I set up my laptop with cords stretched across the room, a microphone that works, and a PowerPoint presentation projected onto a screen at the front of the room. When class begins, I assign the students to one of three elements in public speaking: delivery, content, or audiovisual aids. The students prepare to compose a bulletin board message in the course management system. Then I give the lousiest presentation anyone has ever seen. I trip over the cords, tap on and blow into the microphone, lean on the podium, talk with my back to the students, skip slides, entirely botch the content, and so on. The entire time I am presenting, the students write in their individual bulletin board messages the things I am doing wrong for their assigned area. When I finish presenting, they post their messages. I then pull up a message and we discuss what the student has noted and what I should have done instead. The students thoroughly enjoy this assignment because my presentation is so positively awful that it is funny. But they get the point and do not make the same mistakes themselves.

Botanical Garden Nature-Based Sculpture Program. Not wanting to completely abandon my successful work with writing students and the Garden's sculpture program, I designed a six-week project based on the February event for spring semester public speaking students. As my writing students did, the public speaking students attended the visiting artists' lectures, interviewed the artists, worked alongside the artists to help install the sculpture, and documented their observations in a journal and digital photographs. They researched visiting artists Patrick Dougherty and Yolanda Gutierrez on the Internet and shared their findings with the class. They were then assigned to teams with the goal of designing and developing a multimedia presentation for local elementary school children. Their presentation had to include a brief biographical sketch of the artist, some previous installations, the South Carolina Botanical Garden installation, and a hands-on activity based on a technique used by the artist.

Every team from both classes voiced genuine concern about their ability to capture and maintain the interest of their young audiences. They communicated via e-mail with the teachers of the classes to learn more about their audiences and shared the information with their classmates using the course management system. In class, they prepared, practiced, and revised their presentations. I attended every presentation so I could grade them, and a graduate assistant who works for the Laptop Faculty Development Program digitally recorded their presentations. With no exceptions, my students reported that they learned more from this assignment than they ever

would have from in-class speeches to their peers. They also enjoyed presenting to the young children, and some students asked if they could present to a second class.

Electronic Portfolios. Figuring out how to successfully implement an e-portfolio assignment in my public speaking classes was difficult. The first semester I assigned the e-portfolio, I had access to a digital video recorder. At first, I thought it would be easy and wonderful and no trouble at all. But I soon learned that the tape had to be downloaded to a computer and then converted into individual movie files, which took hours. Then students had trouble downloading the large files from the course management system, so I had to burn them onto CDs and pass them around the room. Their finished products were quite good, but I was not convinced it was worth the hours of work and frustration.

Recently, I tried again with a digital recorder that uses DVDs. Again, I was hopeful. But I learned that the conversion process was still necessary. Having no graduate assistant with time to help me, I gave up having the movie files included in their e-portfolios. The students had only their outlines, critiques, and annotated bibliographies to represent their speeches and presentations. The results were lackluster. As technology progresses at Clemson University, e-portfolios that include at least a short clip of a student's best presentation or speech should be possible without requiring an inordinate amount of faculty time.

Conclusion

Through my teaching of laptop courses for eight semesters, I have learned to focus first on my course objectives and ask myself how I can best help students achieve the learning objective. Once I have my vision, I can explore the possibilities of making the vision real through laptops and other technology. What I appreciate most about laptops is the mobility they allow. Some days the best place to be is in the classroom, where wired connections mean quick access to download needed files or visit a virtual place, or where we can close the door for privacy when students need to pay quiet attention to their work. But at other times, the garden, the amphitheater, a local elementary school, or the middle of Bowman Field—where a house is being built by students—is where we need to be. No matter where we meet, students have their work on their laptops and can continue to produce. Classroom walls no longer confine us, but they remain there when we want or need them.

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