Integrating alumni, librarians and student services colleagues into the intellectual life of the college classroom via Information Technologies

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Abstract: Contemporary college students have high expectations of their classroom experiences. To support those expectations, alumni, support staff, and librarians can be productively integrated into the intellectual life of classrooms. These colleagues often have underused expertise and skills that can be discovered and utilized so as to enrich courses and provide additional value to students. Information technology tools can support this approach in both local and geographically dispersed classrooms.

Introduction

Faculty members are faced with both new student expectations as well as new opportunities in their classrooms. As students pay more for courses, and the work environment becomes more and more tenuous, they expect more value for their educational dollars. Heightened expectations place more onus on the classroom instructor to provide not only content expertise, but also effectively managed courses, quick turnaround times and 24-hour-7-day-a-week access via phone and email. This phenomenon is also driven by greater expectations for immediate gratification and a high level of service; currently, it is also driven by the state of the economy. Students are now more vocal about those expectations in classrooms, of course, but more and more they make their needs and dissatisfactions known publicly with, for example, social media tools.

Colleges are listening and responding as students can “vote with their feet” and enroll in institutions that meet their needs. There is now a concerted effort in colleges to provide increased level of services to students, including counseling, job placement, networking, student organizations, and the greater performance efficiencies that can be provided by electronically mediated registration, financial, retention and other systems. All of this may mean that instructors are casting about for how to provide expected additional value in courses.

This paper discusses adding value by using information technology as a tool that can integrate existing university people-resources into the intellectual life of courses. We discuss those people-resources in terms of alumni, student services colleagues, and librarians.
Student perceptions and the satisfactory classroom experience

What does experience tell us about a “satisfactory” educational experience? In our institution, which proudly features a “practitioner approach” in courses, students in the recent past valued the specific content and the discipline expertise of instructors. Golden Gate University, in fact, speaks to this pragmatic approach in the university mission.

Instructors are aware that contemporary “Gen-?” and “Millennial” students expect more from their classroom experience. They expect instructors to (a) provide highly organized course materials; (b) provide direction, rather than to expect self discipline, self motivation and curiosity, and (c) include Internet/Web technologies as a significant part of the experience.

They are less willing to accept administrative problems, such as errors that may be made in course textbook ordering in the bookstore, or having to wait in lines for registration and advising. When students are frustrated in any way, their complaints, which used to be grumbled about, now may begin, rather than end, with the university’s president. Of most importance to this discussion, these students expect that their education will relate directly to the work environment, and their perceived opportunities in the world of work (see http://www.usatoday.com/money/workplace/2005-11-06-gen-y_x.htm, http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/erm0342.pdf, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/13/opinion/13herbert.html, for a review of student characteristics).

These expectations make it clear that definitions of the satisfactory course experience now include not only content and instructor expertise, but other services, attractions and extrinsic motivators. Three of these available resources and services may be found within the university infrastructure: alumni, student services and librarians. Although technology as a part of this experience is a given, it may not be clear how technology tools can be used to integrate these people-resources into courses. The remainder of the paper discusses the integration of technology and people-resources in the activities of classrooms.

Technology tools available for the classroom

A variety of free, easy to use tools are available to teachers with computer and network access. This section discusses some of those tools with suggestions for their use. While tools such as YouTube, Facebook and LinkedIn are referenced, we discuss primarily weblogs, wikis and the open source classroom environment called Moodle.

A “prime directive” for the use of these tools is that they must have a purpose, and to accomplish that purpose, they must be well-managed, with performance expectations and deliverables attached. A weblog with no theme or an ad hoc wiki mounted with only good intentions will prove to be a waste of time. Knowing this makes the integration of our people-resources somewhat easier. Let’s say, for example, that we have an alumnus, librarian or other resource person who is willing to participate in our course during two
specific weeks. She will be discussing her career progression from function area manager to a C-level position; she lives in Richmond, Virginia, and our real-time course meets in Los Angeles once a week.

Our alumnus will no doubt have a personal and/or corporate Facebook page and will have a presence on LinkedIn. Students will be invited to engage the alumnus on those sites, but the real interactions will come from a weblog and a wiki. What will be the purpose of each?

The weblog’s best use in this situation is as a meeting place for thematic discussions, with the alumnus as discussion leader and the teacher as weblog manager. No-cost weblogs can be created by using entities such as wordpress.com (see the graphic titled “Tom ‘Real World’ Jones”). The teacher or alumnus can determine a theme, direction, and look-and-feel for the weblog. As you know, weblogs generally are structured so that the weblog owner creates discussions that invite comment; this inherent structure is “resource-person friendly” by nature. The weblog owner, in this case the visiting expert or teacher, or both, can create content available to all, invite responses, and in turn respond. Engagement with the alumnus will be expected of the students. A form of directed conversation can ensue that will unite parties that in this case are geographically separated.

Another benefit of the weblog is that some students who are less likely to speak and interact in a face to face course may feel comfortable contributing in weblog environments. Yet another dynamic exists. It may be that the resource person is available for students, but for any number of reasons may choose to interact on a weblog rather than (or in addition to) face to face. There is still another possibility, that a student may have skills to design and manage the design of a particular course weblog. Given that many students already have these skills, it may be that the student weblog product can be engaging and of high quality. When other students know that a classmate has had such input, they may be more favorably disposed to engage in discussions.

Wikis are often confused with weblogs, but a wiki is a specific type of tool. It is a repository for documents and other artifacts, with different levels of access, editability and visibility. One such wiki creation tool is found at pbwiki.com (see the graphic titled “wiki”). In addition to being a work and communication site, wikis can be used to store graphics, audio/video pieces and other artifacts.

Wikis are best used for task-specific functions that require people to actually work together on common products, or to share products for editing and other input. Specific to our integration of people-resources, wikis might be mounted at the beginning of a semester to be used for different ongoing course projects.

If you are interested in experimenting with an online teaching/learning environment, but your organization does not have a relationship with an online learning entity such as eCollege or Blackboard, you might consider the open source tool named Moodle. In the Moodle environment, teachers can create lectures, exams, links and discussions. A
graphic of a sample moodle page for a real Golden Gate University course is included in
the annotated graphics section.

“Learning Objects” is a term that implies digital artifacts that can be reused. Digital
environments such as wikis, weblogs and course management tools such as Moodle allow
for the reuse of any number of interviews, events, papers, projects, videos, graphics and
conversation threads. This ability provides a way to extend and repurpose the relationship
with our people-resources into other sessions and semesters.

The previous sections have discussed in general the electronic tools that can be used to
integrate people-resources into our classrooms. The following sections provide a number
of general suggestions to be considered in engaging alumni, librarians and other people-
resources.

**Integrating alumni into the life of the classroom**

Having willing alumni actively participate in courses can connect students with the real
world. Alumni represent reality and hopefully, the positive outcomes of the university’s
education. As well, they can provide timely content expertise, and discuss that course
content as it applies in the real world of work.

Several suggestions follow that describe a range of contributions that alumni can make,
but perhaps the most important for this discussion is that alumni can be called on to
contribute to course and program design, providing practical curricular input and
assistance for other instructors and colleagues. This sort of planning work is relatively
easy to manage in electronically mediated environments, through the use of conference
calls and ad hoc wikis. If the university can afford to stipend such activities, alumni can
work in one-off projects to accomplish some specific curricular or program work and be
rewarded for their contribution. Their participation in this way is useful to programs, and
can engage alumni in the intellectual makeup of programs.

Another common service alumni can provide is as classroom speakers, panelists in public
forums, and in informational presentations for larger audiences as well as specific
programs. This utility provides a significant sense of value added for students, but it
proves to be highly stimulating for the alumni, who report that they feel reconnected with
the student world by having a venue in which to present their own expertise. An approach
that has proven successful at our university is to engage alumni as a review panel in a
technology program capstone course as evaluators of course or program projects.
Technology tools such as weblogs offer a way to extend these activities across time and
space, for the convenience of everyone involved.

In our institution, the alumni services offices maintain relationships with the university’s
alums. Of course they are often massaged for contributions, but many of them are active
in student activities as speakers and presenters, employers, and advisory board members.
If their university experience has been successful, they are waiting to be of service, and
will be willing to support courses and programs.
In order to discover alumni who fit students’ needs, the instructor may have to proactively seek the services of his or her university’s alumni services organization. That organization may have information about specific alumni or groups of alumni who may be willing to become involved. If that information is available, the instructor can then take it upon himself or herself to contact people and ask them to participate.

Utilizing the services of alumni will first require some thought. Students will enjoy the experience and the alum will be momentarily energized, but there may be no significant contribution to the course. To increase the alum’s value to programs, the instructor can, prior to a class visit, establish a wiki or weblog and expect student discussion on relevant issues, trends and questions pertinent to the alum’s skills. After the visit, ask the alum to interact with the students for follow up discussions.

Ask the alum to provide an overview in writing, or perhaps as part of the visit, of opportunities, connections, suggestions and professional organizations that can be of value to students. Professional organizations often have student prices that are highly attractive, and provide access to both people and practical resources.

Well-managed alumni experiences can benefit everyone. The course is enriched, an alumnus can bring useful skills and information to the course, course content is supplemented, and students will gain additional knowledge. Because the student can see the alumnus role in an attractive context, he or she will be becoming prepared to be a supportive alumnus as well. The proactive instructor will recognize the value of using weblogs and wikis to facilitate these interactions and conversations.

**Integrating university services colleagues into the life of the classroom**

Many institutions now offer significant and highly customized services to a broad range of students. Such services include advising, retention communication, paths to completion, job counseling, resume workshops, writing assistance, psychological counseling, management of internships and Curricular Practical Training experiences. International students may enjoy those services with additional levels of customization and attention. Overall, these services provide a broad range of assistance options for most student needs.

These services live outside the classroom. They are generally not considered the purview of the classroom experience, with perhaps the exception of a Writing Center (http://www.ggu.edu/student_services/caps/learning_support_services/owl_main_page). This is unfortunate, because many of these services can be utilized for specific educational purposes inside the classroom via institutional site links and weblogs and wikis.

Student Services folks, like alumni, are often repositories of content specific knowledge that goes unused in courses. The interested instructor can form alliances with various support staff who have backgrounds and interests that can supplement courses. An internship support person who has degree and practical expertise in Human Resource
issues can be assigned to specific course content areas. Another example is the Writing Center tutor who is widely travelled and who has some experience in European business practices. Those colleagues then become a dual resource, able to supplement the intellectual life of the course according to their job descriptions and again according to their other backgrounds, interests and skills.

As in utilizing the services of alumni, it will be necessary to plan for the best use of technology in the integration of these colleagues. One-off presentations to courses about particular services may still be the typical use of those colleagues, but the instructor who is willing to plan ahead by, say, instituting and managing an in-house informational weblog or wiki aimed at uniting resources within the university, will be rewarded.

**Integrating librarians into the life of the course**

Librarians, like support service and alumni colleagues, are an underused resource. Their intellectual presence in education continues to be strongly evidenced in “Information Literacy” discussions (American Association of School Librarians, 1998). However, they inevitably have professional and personal expertise that can contribute to courses in other, significant ways. As mentioned above, instructors may have to interact with librarians to discover those skills and expertise, but the results can be rewarding. In our setting, a librarian has a significant background and professional presence in the Human Resources field, that can enrich any number of several courses and programs. (See the graphic titled Lib Guides, Profile for for Margot Hanson, at the end of this document).

Librarians differ slightly from alumni and services staff in that they have a traditional role in the life of university classrooms. However, that role is often that of cheerleader for research resources, or as tour guides for the library itself. Teachers still often refer to the library and librarians in their syllabi, and exhort students to visit the library for research and course project assistance, but this approach more often than not results in little or no follow up (See graphic pages titled “the Eclectic Strategist” and “Ask a librarian”).

A more productive relationship can begin by moving past the “one shot” approach toward utilizing technology to create co-mingled activities that are integrated into the life of the course.

Here are several suggestions: first, the instructor must commit to extending the relationship with the librarian. This is more difficult than it may seem, given that course design is the result of perhaps years of planning and practice. Updating content to support an additional classroom resource is time consuming.

The librarian can of course visit your class for specific purposes and activities, such as to discuss critical thinking and its application in research and research paper formulation, to provide virtual / real library tours, or to be a participant in course panels and presentations. Instructors can continue the practice of inviting librarians to classes, but should consider making that first visit is one of a series that has some type of “story arc”,

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that is, a meaningful relationship to course content. The use of a course-specific weblog featuring a library/librarian theme can be implemented.

The availability of video means that such visits can occur in person or online, and that there can be a number of such interactions designed for specific purposes. Here is an instance where a tool such as YouTube can be helpful. Even if your institution is not able to support video creation, ad hoc videos can be easily created and made available for institutional and classroom audiences.

Another approach is to require evidence of the use of library or other online resources in evaluated course deliverables. For example, it might become a real requirement (that is, points attached) for students to interact with librarians in the development of topics, or to show evidence of having dialogued with librarians over both research processes and application of findings in specific course contexts. If librarians are content experts in some areas, these interactions can supplement a student’s research and learning skills.

This approach can be made more substantive if all parties in the course are expected to interact within a Wiki or weblog on course topics. In this way, the Wiki/weblog becomes a knowledge creation and management tool as well as a communication mode.

Toward the end of the semester, a student(s) can collate and interpret the information from the various course wikis/weblogs and create a report or portfolio for classmates’ take-away materials.

These few activities can integrate the librarian into the intellectual life of the course. There is a beginning and end, and beginning/end products that provide takeaways for students, teachers and librarians. A team product based on a common collaborative effort will support the particular course, and can become a model for other teachers and other courses.

**Using the integration of technology approach as an exemplar for generating institutional support**

Creating change is difficult, and using technology to integrate colleagues into courses is an example of such a change. The above discussion has centered on technology tools and approaches that can bring together existing people and physical resources in single courses, but with an eye toward applications in other environments.

The processes discussed here support scalability; Facebook and LinkedIn are hosted elsewhere and create no technology overhead for the institution. Weblogs and wikis have learning curves, but they are minimal, and they require little of technology in addition to Web access. The cost is right for cash-strapped institutions. Their benefits as communicative environments to unite teachers, students, alumni, librarians and other people-resources make them attractive tools, whose applications will only grow and become more diverse as people become more comfortable with their use.
There are several potentially desirable long-term outcomes of using these tools. Students can become more involved in courses, leading to greater satisfaction. Resource people will be engaged with classroom activities and will experience a greater involvement in the teaching/learning process, in addition to experiencing a closer relationship with the institution and its stakeholders. Finally, the teacher who utilizes these tools can become a model of behaviors that are seen as desirable and educationally credible by peers and colleagues, and in so doing will garner their support for future such efforts.

Those who have integrated colleague resources in their classrooms can then become faculty development mentors and presenters, interacting with their fellow instructors in applying these approaches into their own classes.

**Using the integration of technology approach to support course and program assessment**

The approaches and tools discussed here have implications for programs, departments and schools. This approach is scalable in that one success story can provide the framework for adapting the approach to, say, a group of core courses in a program, or perhaps for use as a teaching model in a department or school.

Assessment plays a large role in contemporary university settings. Informal assessment is naturally supported because of the use of wikis and weblogs as discussion portals and information repositories: the interactions, discussions and materials that support class interactions can remain available for analysis and revision.

Formal assessment processes are another matter, requiring clarity on course and program objectives, and how they are tied together. If an organization is engaged in formal assessment for an accrediting body, there are multiple processes to be engaged in over time, and much paperwork. If you are considering utilizing librarians, alumni and other community members such as is suggested here, you should be particularly aware of the need to thoughtfully integrate their contributions into your accrediting schema.

**Conclusion**

Having students and colleagues work together in low or no-cost electronically mediated environments has only recently become possible, and represents a singular opportunity to unite teachers, staff, librarians, alumni and students in ways that can easily and inexpensively transcend traditional information and culture boundaries in our classrooms. Forward looking teachers can use information technologies to create engaging, participatory educational environments that increase educational effectiveness, and that increase student satisfaction with their courses and programs.
References


Real world IT finance

Hello everyone, I’m Tom Jones, currently a principal in a Silicon Valley startup aimed at managing data in cloud environments for medium-sized businesses.

I’m going to be a guest in the class for the second four weeks, leading a discussion of IT finance. I have a history as a Chief Information Officer for two organizations, so I have a good sense of how IT finance works.

To kick off our discussion, I’d like to hear from each class member (by Friday at 11 pm) on these questions: what is your current level of expertise in business finance. Second, what are two things you want to know about Information Technology finance and budgeting?

Edit this entry.

One Response to “Real world IT finance”

bfulkerth Says:
March 6, 2010 at 6:56 pm | Reply | edit

Mr. Jones, thanks for being in our class. I have trouble balancing a checkbook, and am afraid of business finance, but I know I have to know about it. Can we talk about how to help a person like me?
Wiki example, pbwiki.org

Hello everyone, Leona, librarian here.

We've been using this space to share information on resources and tactics for conducting online research.

Remember our "rules of the road": we are sharing information, but we intend to use this space as a repository for our communal knowledge, not only this semester, but for others in upcoming semesters.

As we store knowledge, we also need to categorize it so that it can be rediscovered and used by others. To that end, remember that you want to provide 

 tagging for your entries, so that when people inside our course search for something of interest by using search terms, they are more likely to find your contribution.

Tagging information is important in the Internet/Web world. If you want a refresher on the concepts and practices of tagging, let's talk by phone, email, in the library, or here in the Wiki on the Discussion page.

See you in class in two weeks!

Leona
Moodle page, from a real Golden Gate University certificate course
The Golden Gate University General Library landing page
(http://www.ggu.edu/university_library/).
Librarian Margot Hanson’s page (http://ggu.libguides.com/profile.php?uid=17199) demonstrates her work in creating study/research guides for the specific disciplines aligned with her expertise. Note also the information for contacting her, either by chat, phone or email.
The Ask-a-Librarian page (http://www.university-library.org/meebo/index.php) provides another venue for communication between clients (alumni are included) and library staff.
The Library Weblog (http://www.eclecticstrategist.blogspot.com/) is a venue for general information sharing and dialoguing on topics of interest to the GGU community. Note the subheading, indicating the range of topics modulated “via the GGU university library.”