Coherence In and Beyond the Seminar Classroom: a practical combination of active learning and collaboration software.

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This presentation and supporting paper will present strategies and experiences with web accessible collaboration software (“the wiki”) in introductory and upper-division college classes. Co-presenters will discuss the project from two perspectives: that of the professor integrating wiki into instruction and that of the education professor researching and evaluating the efficacy of these tools. We will consider student and faculty reactions and discuss advantages and disadvantages of utilizing collaboration software in small seminar and large lecture class settings.

Our presentation extends current research on the potential of the web as a multi-way communications channel. The web allows us to create a flexible forum that offers the opportunity for students to be exposed to multiple points of view, perspectives, and/or beliefs and to communicate with a real audience using written language (Harris, 2000). In some instances, faculty may be more willing to discuss prickly issues online and students may be more equitably and cross-culturally involved (Merryfield, 2001). The web also potentially extends the classroom beyond fifty minutes three days a week (Gamas & Nordquist, 1997). After a decade of experience with and maturation of web-based tools, a common barrier to adoption remains the complexity, cost, and equipment requirements for creating interactive collaborative web-based applications (Ringrose, 2001).

This project focuses on doing one thing very well: deploying a novel arrangement of new collaboration software and wireless technology to strengthen teaching of writing and analysis. Transparent tools and ubiquitous access allow faculty and students pursue a learning model that begins with faculty modeled practices, continues with peer review, group analysis and presentation, and culminates in student work based on revision and reflection on persuasive historical arguments. Crucial to the project is a technology base that facilitates student-centered learning
in the classroom and allows its seamless, coherent continuation beyond the classroom. In addition, this resource serves to build community among upper-level students in a discipline that otherwise isolates students as they engage in substantial research and writing projects.

In this session we will begin with an introduction and demonstration of the wiki project using several case studies: a topics course on Asia and Imperialism, a senior history seminar on Sex, Death, and Private Lives, and a large sophomore course on the Ethnic Experience in America. The second part of the session will demonstrate how the tools facilitate integration of Socratic principles, encourage critical thinking by groups, and showcase the tools’ transparency and flexibility. The session will conclude with presentation of our research findings and audience discussion.