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Discovering New Ways to Teach LitHum with Dr. Hiie Saumaa

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Highlighting the work that faculty do here at Columbia is a wonderful way for us to share ideas and grow our community of innovative instructors. With this in mind, we wish to spotlight Dr. Hiie Saumaa. Hiie's partnership with the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) has produced ever-evolving work that has changed the dynamics of her Literature Humanities classroom. We would like to showcase two projects done in past semesters, as well as a new project that will launch in the fall.

Our relationship with Hiie started in 2010. Then a PhD student and instructor teaching in the University Writing Program, Hiie would often stop into our faculty support lab, looking for a quiet place to work or to ask questions about setting up the Learning Management System for her courses. A budding relationship developed over time as we discussed different ways of using technology to prepare, support, and extend the work being done in her classroom. When Hiie was given the opportunity to teach a Literature Humanities course in Columbia's Core Curriculum, she was interested in doing something different.

The CTL was excited to explore possibilities in a core course. We started by outlining the goals that Hiie wanted to achieve.

"I want my students to see themselves as creative thinkers and innovators", she said. "And I want them to have the experience of creating something individually, as well as together as a group. I also want my classroom to be a place where students can create and experiment, using the material covered in the course and making something fun and different out of it."

With that in mind, we embarked on a strategy to meet those goals, based on several outcomes Hiie wanted to accomplish.

"I had several aims," she continued. "First, I wanted to help students increase their familiarity with texts that have shaped the Western canon. Second, I wanted to create a safe space for them to effectively develop their skills in discussion, academic writing, and critical thinking. And lastly, I wanted to encourage self-reflective practices, where the students could reflectively write on the material, making it their own and having a relationship with it."

Our conversations led to the development of a unique strategy for her course.

Our first project in the spring of 2014, was the design, construction, and implementation of a collaborative wiki, to be used in unison with Hiie's face-to-face instruction. Students were asked to co-create their own epic, a poem that would allow them to explore voice, rhythm, and structure in a hands-on, collaborative way. In addition to analyzing texts, students were now embarking on creating something of their own, bringing their creativity and artistic vision into the mix. In groups of four, students made weekly contributions of 40 lines to the evolving text and supplemented it with hyperlinks, curated images, and original artwork. The students not only analyzed and closely read ancient texts, they also had an experience of what it might feel like to create such a work. As a result, the students reported having gained a much more nuanced understanding of the course materials as well as a useful experience with co-creation.

Hiie was encouraged by the success of the wiki project, and the positive feedback that it received. Itmotivated her to try something new again.

For our second project, launched in the fall of 2014—and now spanning across two Literature Humanities sections over one academic year—the analysis of the texts took the form of a newsletter. The web publishing tool LucidPress was used for the construction of the newsletter, with students creating videos, sketchings, paintings, and textual interpretations of the texts. Students were contributing work that best suited their individual talents, which made for a beautiful panoply of art and thought.

Visit the student-produced newsletter here: http://pub.lucidpress.com/90b4b8c8-a923-4079-ae83-1bdea84bba1e/

Hiie integrated the newsletter into her classroom by asking each group to give a short preview of their work—this "advertising" created excitement in the entire class and made everyone more eager to check out new additions to the newsletter. "In both sections, we would also look at the work of the individuals in each group. We listened to songs the students had created—such as "The Metamorphosis Rap"—watched their movie trailers, and looked at their original artwork. The entire class admired the unique talents of everyone in each group. Many of the contributions were amusing—we were laughing!The latter is a great way to build a community and to foster an open-minded learning environment, as well as to reduce the stress which usually hits students toward the middle and end of the semester," Hiie says. The students would also occasionally refer to their newsletter entries in discussions on the texts that were not explicitly connected to the newsletter project, which showed that they had integrated their experience with the rest of the course. "The project was a unique way to bring out individual talents in the students and let them do things that they are good at, and could be proud of. This is an important, but in academic contexts often neglected, aspect of learning," Hiie observes.

Building the newsletter with two sections of students enabled a certain kind of communication, or dialogue, that was never before achieved. Students unable to work together face-to-face were now contributing to something bigger than their respective class work. The project also gave students an experience with public writing—writing that is read not only by the instructor but also classmates, students from another section, and potentially other readers who have access to the link. Using technology to bridge the gap between two sections of students opens up space for an even bigger question: is there a way to help students across all 40+ sections of Literature Humanities communicate and create together?

One of the most informative aspects for us, from both the wiki and newsletter projects, was found in the exploration of "blended learning" in the context of a literature humanities course. These types of courses are sometimes difficult to integrate technology into, as they necessitate a large amount of time for face-to-face discussion. We learned that a course like Literature Humanities can be blended successfully when we carefully examine the strengths and limitations of both online and face-to face teaching and learning, and then design the course accordingly.

For the upcoming academic year, Hiie will focus on exploring the art of discussion. "Educators tend to take it for granted that students know how to discuss and understand what makes a good discussion. But these discussion skills and strategies are rarely taught and mindfully evaluated. Is there an art to discussion? Can students and educators learn to become better leaders of discussion and more attentive listeners? It would be immensely valuable for students to widen their skills at discussion. These are very important, transferable skills that they will use in other courses, and life in general. Why not study these skills more closely?" Hiie notes. With the technical expertise from the CTL, Hiie's sections will be exposed to several different online discussion techniques and activities, experimenting with the format and striving to better understand the differences between online and face-to-face discourse.

"I have learned many important lessons with these projects. There is an immense intellectual excitement that these kinds of projects can bring to a classroom—tapping into creativity in academic contexts can be very energizing and rewarding, for both the students and the instructor. Working with the CTL has engaged me in inspiring discussions about pedagogy and technology, through which I have come to embrace collaboration and meaningful uses of technological tools in my classes," Hiie says.

Relationships with educators like Hiie Saumaa make our work meaningful. These are the kinds of collaborations we want to foster as we move forward with the new CTL, and embark on a new academic year

Thank you Hiie. We wish you luck and success as you continue to change teaching and learning in the Columbia classroom!