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Edited by:

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Editor

Alison Bland  
Managing Editor

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Guest Editor:

Karen Swan, Ed.D.  
Stukel Distinguished Professor of Educational Leadership

University of Illinois Springfield





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Volume 5, Number 1  
Spring 2009

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>Introduction to the Special Issue on Blended Learning<br/>Part 1: Blended Learning in the Classroom</b><br><i>Karen Swan</i>   | 1  |
| <b>Blending with Purpose: The Multimodal Model</b><br><i>Anthony Picciano</i>   | 4  |
| <b>On Offering a Blended Cell Biology Course</b><br><i>Gerald Bergtrom</i>  | 15 |
| <b>The Sage of Two Professors Co-Teaching a Blended Course</b><br><i>Murray Blank and Conrad Boyle</i>  | 22 |
| <b>Blended Learning in a Digital World: Writing and Research for the<br/>Facebook Generation</b><br><i>Dan Kulmala and Andy Stanton</i>   | 34 |
| <b>Using Blended Learning to Ensure Consistency and Quality in Multiple<br/>Course Sections</b><br><i>Karen Perrin, Laura Rusnak, Shenghua Zha, David Lewis, and<br/>Sandhya Srinivasan</i> | 42 |
| <b>Using a Blended Approach to Teach Research Methods: The Impact of<br/>Integrating Web-Based and In-Class Instruction</b><br><i>Mary D. McVey</i>   | 49 |
| <b>Advanced Technical Writing: Blending Virtual Communities</b><br><i>Reneta D. Lansiquot</i>   | 57 |
| <b>Third Space: Blended Teaching and Learning</b><br><i>Debra Mayes Pane</i>  | 64 |

## **Blended Learning in a Digital World: Writing and Research for the Facebook Generation**

**Dan Kulmala**

Associate Professor of English  
Fort Hays State University

**Andy Stanton**

Assistant Professor of Communication Studies  
Fort Hays State University

Supporting websites:

<http://fhsudaretodream08.ning.com/>

<http://www.fhsu.edu/communication/MultiMediaCompII>

### **Abstract**

Course management systems such as Blackboard provide static, one-way communication for the on-line learner and educator. However, as the Web 2.0 phenomenon exemplifies, today's digital learner needs skills in an interactive, blended web environment. Blogs, wikis, online video, podcasts, and user-generated websites offer ideal pedagogical opportunities for collaboration and innovation in and out of the classroom. As part of an institution-wide effort to better meet digital natives' needs, Fort Hays State University faculty were encouraged to "Dare to Dream" during the 2007-2008 academic year. Utilizing this theme and also implementing the university's Writing Across the Curriculum program, faculty in the departments of English and Communication Studies collaboratively worked on a "writing with video for the web" project. With a deliberate focus on blended learning, this project involved students in English Composition II classes and Multimedia Production classes. The collaborative website was hosted on <http://www.fhsudaretodream08.ning.com/>. After the students turned in their final projects, all were showcased in a website created using Apple's iWeb application and hosted on the FHSU web server at <http://www.fhsu.edu/communication/MultiMediaCompII>.

### **Introduction: Daring to Dream of Engaged Learning**

The field of academic production faces radical changes as it moves away from the modern model of education to the post-modern model. The use of digital technology in and out of the classroom forms the groundwork for many of the initiatives compelling this change—whether we address assessment or authentic learning or workforce preparedness. As Tapscott (2009) points out, the net generation (students born 1977-1997) is forcing a change in the model of teaching, from a "teacher-focused approach based on instruction to a student-focused model based on collaboration." At Fort Hays State University, a medium-sized, state comprehensive university in Western Kansas, the need to adapt to this new field of academic production is at the focus of the assessment and review of university-wide programs. During the 2007-2008 academic year at Fort Hays State University, two initiatives compelled faculty members to explore the possibilities of innovative directions for the university, for departments and for our pedagogical practices: FHSU President Edward Hammond's Dare to Dream [www.fhsu.edu/dtod](http://www.fhsu.edu/dtod) and the Writing

Across the Curriculum initiatives. Within this academic atmosphere of innovation, faculty members were encouraged to experiment with new pedagogical practices, to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors related to their disciplines, and to re-envision FHSU as the university of the future. With the goal of engaging students in learning and in utilizing technology as part of FHSU's Mobile Teaching and Learning Program, several faculty members put their research on the post-modern university to work in their classes. Integrating digital technology and writing together proved to be a more than suitable combination, especially with the goal of engaging students in active, real-life communication practices.

One of the primary goals for the Writing Across the Curriculum Program is to use writing as a tool for learning, rather than merely add writing assignments to courses. Digital technology makes it extremely possible to get students involved in the creation of their own web-spaces, enabling them to share their work in class (face-to-face) and online (virtually). Therefore, we, Andy Stanton in Communication Studies and Dan Kulmala in English, took hold of this opportunity to collaborate together on a project that would hybridize the educational experience for our students in a "writing with video for the web project." With a deliberate focus on blended learning, this project involved students in English Composition II classes and Multimedia Production classes. Students in the English Composition II class prepared background information and prepared a written essay on the topic of education. Specifically, English Composition students were to answer the following question: What is education?

Instructors then matched students from both classes, organized them into smaller workgroups (3-6 students in each group), and created an online communication website using <http://www.ning.com/>, where students could share ideas, post photos and videos, and create an electronic version of the essay. Students in the Multimedia Production class were instructed to work with the English students as "clients" and to help them put their ideas into an interactive audio, video, and web environment. The Multimedia Production students were required to utilize content input from the English Comp II students, in addition to personal interviews with the content team members, and process that information into a multimedia project that showcased the main points of the essay. Students were required to utilize both technical skills by working with the Apple iLife and iWork software suites and creative skills in choosing audio, photography, and video to accompany the projects.

### **The Project: Learning Across the Curriculum at FHSU**

Reading and listening, the passive pedagogical practices of the modern model, no longer form the foundation of meaningful learning—and probably never did. Students learn best by *doing* and by having clearly defined goals established for them, and following the constructivist theory on learning, students gain meaning through engaged learning, interacting socially, and constructing knowledge (Fink, 2003; Jonassen, Howland, Marra, & Crismond, 2007; West & West, 2009). Blended learning practices are particularly suited for these types of educational experiences given that they link the academic with real-world contexts. Therefore, students get the added advantage of learning by connecting the content and practices of the class to a relevant context. For this collaborative project between English Composition and Multimedia Production, contextual teaching and learning were at the core of our educational goals, proving to be an ideal combination giving rich, purposeful objectives for both freshmen-level writers and graduate-level pre-professionals. In this sense, our Learning Across the Curriculum initiative met the goals of theories asserting the benefits of contextual teaching and learning:

As such, according to contextual teaching and learning principles, the role of the instructor is *not* to provide *learning*. The role of the instructor is to provide the *context* in which learning can occur. Contextual teaching and learning engages students in significant and relevant activities that help them connect their academic learning to real-life situations and problems. (West & West, 2009, p. 22)

For reasons obvious to these two collaborators, placing an emphasis on the context of course material combined with the practices of blended learning (instructor-led training, e-learning and web-based training, professional development, and digital, media enhancement) would create an ideal educational experience for our students and our own development as educators.

## Goals and Objectives for English Composition 102

After having taught English Composition for nearly fifteen years—from graduate school to the present—(Dan Kulmala) found myself being “worn out” by the typical habits and processes of the English Composition curriculum (and I know that my students, many of them now digital natives of the Internet Age, yearned for something new). The typical routine for English Composition followed this regimen—inscribed, in fact, by a standard departmental syllabus adopted in 1993: one, include a handbook and a standard textbook approved by the department; two, have students read a series of essays on a series of timely issues; three, discuss these issues—as robustly as possible; four, have students draft and write their essays; five, peer-edit the essays; and six, grade the essays. Repeat four or five more times throughout the semester. Frankly, I felt trapped in a Camus-like, “Myth of Sisyphus” program of study, a kind of academic suicide by pedagogical repetition. Other than my own professional need for change, I was convinced that my own students were not receiving a genuine, authentic education that taught them what it means to write a meaningful document for a defined audience and specific purpose.

I found academic salvation in three initiatives: FHSU’s Dare to Dream, Writing Across the Curriculum, and the Mobile Teaching and Learning Program. Having taken charge of the Writing Across the Curriculum initiative, I was immersed in the current research on not only Writing Across the Curriculum programs but also the move toward post-modern models of learning and educating. As a digital immigrant, I knew that I needed to connect to the digital natives in my classroom, and this connection would only happen if I released myself from the modern forms of education and journeyed into the infinite digital space of the post-modern. Moreover, what I was researching made tremendous sense as I thought about the digital culture given birth by the Information Age. In his book *The Digital Revolution and the Coming of the Postmodern University*, Carl A. Raschke (2003) outlines this cultural shift in the academic landscape:

The most important shift of course is what we might term the unframing of educational content. In the past what one learned was always dependent on the availability of scarce curricular media and personnel (e.g. specialized textbooks, high-powered professors, the amenities of “student life”). The scarcity of content went hand in hand with professional privilege and authority. In short, knowledge was always “framed” by the special status of those who managed it. (p. 96)

Education always has engaged in the practice of information management, but a particular education model still dominated my pedagogical practices, and I needed to “unframe” myself from the old models and do something I had always avoided—embrace technology. Yet, I did not want to use technology just for the sake of using it in the classroom. Too often, I found that educators used Blackboard and such just to help organize material, and I wanted to use technology in a manner that would engage students in learning the class material, not just shuffle it around.

FHSU’s Dare to Dream and its Mobile Teaching and Learning initiatives opened up an atmosphere free for innovation. In this sense, I was given the opportunity to explore the possibilities of changing the curriculum, even if the experiment failed, without having to navigate the usual academic channels and bridges and walls to get any alterations to my curriculum approved. Combining this spirit of academic freedom with my attendance at the Educause ELI conference held in San Antonio, Texas in 2008 prepared me for blending the learning experiences for my students, using digital technology, establishing learner outcome goals, and connecting learning to a real-world context. Andy Stanton, someone I had worked with in Faculty Senate and on the Writing Across the Curriculum Program, proved to be the ideal collaborative companion, given his teaching a Multimedia Production course and his knowledge of digital technology and learning. He and I had been engaged in many conversations about the future of education and had shared our thoughts about the post-modern university. Given that our students are emerging from this cultural shift, we decided that we would put our students in the roles of defining contemporary education.

When I imagined this assignment and this project, I had several goals in mind. For example, peer-editing and collaborative activities are routinely a part of many English Composition courses. However, with rather limited experience editing texts, most English Composition students typically follow the basic

instructions provided by an instructor rather than having any real invested interest in offering suggestions for the improvement of a peer's document. I wanted the students to have a genuine interest in helping their group members improve the quality of their essays. I also did not want the students to merely use technology as a mechanism for shuffling and submitting their essays. Having become a convert of the ideas of the post-modern university, I wanted my students to use technology for active engagement in their work, their ideas, and their learning. Therefore, the following outlines the primary goals I had in mind beyond writing a strong essay when I devised the Define Education at FHSU assignment. Students would:

1. research their topic with a sense of committed engagement to accomplishing a task;
2. find value in their project by devising a theory they have an invested - economically and professionally - interest in;
3. work collaboratively with others with a unified sense of purpose;
4. creatively consider alternative ways to express their definition of education beyond writing an essay; and
5. write with a hyper-attentive sense of audience as they considered effective means by which to communicate their definition of education.

Putting this assignment on the Ning site and collaborating with members from another class created the context that allowed for the goals outlined above to be actualized. On the very first day my students signed up for their Ning accounts, they took on the roles of professionals who had a project to complete, and I found them actively seeking me out to get ideas about how to accomplish their task. We began with the assignment I offer in the box below:

#### **The Assignment: Dare to Dream: Education at FHSU**

**Due: Friday, March 28.**

**Objective:** Define education at FHSU and relate that definition to your ambitions, your desires, and your dreams about your future.

**Approach:** I suggest that you try the following as a way to get started.

1. Start with **inquiry and analysis**. Look around the FHSU campus. What do you see? What is the purpose of some of the buildings? Where are particular departments and colleges located? What type of academic and social life exists in these educational spaces?
2. What is the atmosphere of the FHSU campus? How would you define this place by specific, concrete activities or places on campus? Try to provide a picture of the student and faculty demographics of FHSU. Put faces and activities and places to the academic community of FHSU.
3. Explore the FHSU website. What information do you find about FHSU? What is the mission of FHSU, for example? What types of organizations exist at FHSU that appeal to you?
4. **Beyond** the FHSU campus. What is happening in America and around the globe that might be contributing to the academic community of FHSU?
5. **Document and describe** what you observe. Put what you **analyze** into your own words. How do you see the information and evidence you have collected?
6. **Think critically** about your observations. Ask questions that will compel you to go **beyond** your observations. Based on your observations, what kind of place is FHSU? What does FHSU offer you for

your future? Where is FHSU taking you? How will FHSU get you there?

7. **Reflect upon** your questions and your answers to those questions. What is the purpose of education for America today?

**Requirements:** I will expect each group to hand in the following:

1. A series of notes that documents the information you have gathered. These can be notes that respond to the **Approach Section** outlined above. Regardless, I want to see information you have gathered and your thoughts about that information.
2. A short essay that provides your group's definition of education along with supporting evidence that helps to prove that your thesis is correct. Your group should consider very specific items of support for your essay. So use what you see around you to define education at FHSU
3. **Dimensions:** This essay should be at least 800 words in length, double-spaced with one inch margins, and typed at a 12-point font. I expect a creative title that gets to the heart of your thesis and a title page. I will be grading on content, grammar and punctuation. And I will be looking for a significant, insightful lesson—either stated or implied.

The assignment forced us, students and instructor, to get out of the “boxes” of education, which meant that we left the classroom to explore the FHSU environment to gather material. Some students borrowed cameras and digital video cameras from the FHSU Learning Commons to use in their capturing visual evidence of education at FHSU—interviews with students and faculty, video of activities on campus, and just random shots of the campus itself. I found myself encouraging my students to ask many questions, especially about the purpose of their education and the physical place of their educational environment. Soon, their essays reflected a mixture of their history with education and the changes they experienced, culminating in expressions of what they desired out of their education.

### **Goals and Objectives for Multimedia Production**

Students enrolled in the multimedia production class were all communication studies majors, with a majority emphasizing in advertising and public relations. These students needed to acquire a combination of a) technical skills to operate the Apple iLife & iWork software; b) small group communication skills to work with clients; and c) social networking skills to incorporate an online social network into a professional work setting.

By working collaboratively with the English composition classes, the multimedia production students would have the experience of establishing work relationships with students they had never met before and also working with students from different cultures. Students enrolled in classes from both departments were from the United States and China. This provided not only challenges in communication skills, but in understanding each other's cultures.

*Technical Skills Utilizing iLife & iWork: Familiarize students with iTunes, iMovie, iWeb, iPhoto, Keynote and Garageband*

Rather than making students focus on both content creation and technical skill mastery, the partnership between the English class and the communication studies class generated the content. The English composition students were to provide the communication studies students with their thoughts on the future of higher education at Fort Hays State University.

The communication studies students were able to focus on the theories of multimedia production and the technical aspects of the Apple iLife software to best communicate the ideas written by their peers in the

English class. Students evaluated which aspect of the Apple iLife software would work best for their clients. Many students created an entire website utilizing iWeb, iPhoto, Keynote, Garageband, and iMovie, while other students decided to best visualize their “clients” needs by creating a video in iPhoto, Keynote, and iMovie.

*Small Group Communication Skills: Increase small group skills to achieve a common goal*

Part of the instruction of advertising and public relations theories and skills must include small group communication theory. Most advertising and public relations professionals work in small group settings, either in an agency or an in-house communication department. The communication studies students were also challenged by the fact that very little face-to-face interaction would occur between the groups as the English students’ classes met on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and the communication studies class met on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

*Social Networking Skills: Establishing and utilizing a Social Networking Site for professional use*

Today’s college students are very familiar with social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and MySpace, but very few have taken the steps to see the value of social networking in the communication industry. Nie’s study of online relationships (2001) showed past critics of the Internet have claimed use of the technology decreases a person’s interpersonal skills (as cited in Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). In contrast, Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton (2001) suggest that the use of the Internet and SNSs can help with a person’s interpersonal connectivity and organizational involvement. With the introduction of the Ning site, I was able to show students the ease of setting up a site and how they could communicate with their clients online and also have the “luxury” of having their online discussions’ documents in the Ning site.

## **Outcomes**

Every collaborative project has positive and negative elements. Overall, the multimedia students enjoyed working with the English Composition students and indicated it was helpful to them to have the Ning site as a way to not only communicate with the other members in their workgroup, but also to be able to upload photos, videos, and music selections during the course of the project and once the project was finished.

Even so, various multimedia students reported they had difficulty communicating with their peers in the English Composition class even with the use of the Ning site. They reported some of the students felt a disconnect with the project because their role was to merely write the content and not to help with the construction of the video or website. For future projects, we believe students from courses in both departments should be evaluated on their collaboration and communication throughout the entire project, not just at the beginning. Also, not all of the students’ essays from English Composition were posted on the site. Instead, students posted versions of their essays as they took them apart for the multimedia project. In the future, we decided that we would be certain to include the essays so that we would be able to follow the progress from page to multimedia stage.

The English Composition students soon learned that an essay is NOT necessarily the best way to convey a message to someone putting together a multimedia production of their ideas. The essays allowed for the expression of their ideas, but did not allow for a framework or a direction for putting together a kind of script for the multimedia design of their definition of education. Consequently, students found themselves engaging in the act of analysis and synthesis, taking their essays apart and re-organizing the information so that the students in the Multimedia class could get a better idea about how to portray their definition of education. Using the Ning site proved particularly helpful for this process as the students shared their ideas about how to re-construct their essays into a multimedia format. As a result of this needed modification of the essays, students often remarked that the Ning site itself was turning into the best

source of information by which to present and communicate a digital definition of education for our contemporary culture.

One of the most exciting collaborative experiences came from the group formed by Nancy, Noel, Lauren, Julianna, and Chelsey. Not only did these students work well together by communicating their ideas through the Ning site, but they also provided rich commentary about the nature of the project. During one session, I asked these students about their thoughts on digitized communication and learning. Excitedly, they began chatting about how immense the possibilities are for learning in this manner. Being able to share ideas and comments with others in and out of their classes about the shape and direction of their project was high on their list as a main reason for continuing to learn through a social networking arena of education. The possibilities for learning, according to these students, are limitless. An additional topic of discussion convinced me of the benefits of collaboration and blended learning. The same students began discussing that digitized learning is global learning. In this group, the students came from a variety of global cultures: Mexico, China, and the US, and yet, they were all communicating together on a common topic that interested them: the future of education.

Obviously, these students learned academic skills that go beyond the traditional classroom. Digitizing and blending their classroom experience sparked active engagement in key academic skills like inquiry, analysis, problem-solving, critical thinking, reflection, and audience perception by breaking down the walls of the typical, modern educational experience. The students, then, were liberated to learn by engaging in a model of education that follows a real-life, work-related experience. For me as an instructor, I felt liberated, and I became convinced that all English Composition courses should be taught in this manner. Using e-Portfolios and cross-listing courses is the future of English Composition. Over this past year, I have led the way for the use of e-Portfolios in the classroom, eagerly asking to be assigned four English Composition courses for both the fall and spring semesters. Currently, faculty members at FHSU are piloting an e-Portfolio database supported by the New York Times Knowledge Network, called [Epsilon](#). This global learning system allows for all the social networking capabilities of a Ning site, plus the addition of maintaining a student's academic progress through rubric-based learning. Such digitized global learning systems allow for even greater blended learning experiences than the traditional classroom setting since instructors can share course material and activities with anyone connected to the Epsilon environment. Therefore, during the 2009-2010 academic year I will be cross-listing my English Composition courses with faculty at the University of New Hampshire and the University of Toledo in blended learning projects.

## **Conclusion**

As more and more learners enter college as "digital natives", the issue of blended learning across the curriculum and utilizing both interpersonal and online communication will become more and more significant. Incoming students will have attended elementary and high schools with one-to-one laptop initiatives, ubiquitous wi-fi access, and constant multimedia message exposure. The traditional model of pedagogy where students sit in a classroom and listen to a faculty member lecture is fading to a more post-modern model where classrooms collaborate together with other classrooms across campus and across international borders. The use of the Internet and social networking sites will help facilitate this new, innovative shift in education. The results of this project help to underscore what many academics and educators are coming to understand about our current culture. Facebook, MySpace, i-Tunes, Twitter, Epsilon and other tools all point to a new term by which to identify what the Internet and digital communication have created: the Share-It Generation. In this rich, ubiquitous environment of learning, the pedagogical practices of blended learning become key methods by which to enhance students' educational experiences through course delivery systems that are already changing the ways in which we work and communicate in the professional world.

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