



visible knowledge project

a collaborative investigation of learning, inquiry, and technology



## The Difference that Inquiry Makes:

A Collaborative Case Study of Technology and Learning,  
from the Visible Knowledge Project.

Edited By Randy Bass & Bret Eynon



Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship



**"The Difference that Inquiry Makes: A Collaborative Case Study of Technology and Learning, from the Visible Knowledge Project,"** *edited by Randy Bass and Bret Eynon*

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From *The Difference that Inquiry Makes: A Collaborative Case Study on Technology and Learning*, from the Visible Knowledge Project<sup>1</sup>, edited by Randy Bass and Bret Eynon

### Prologue

The Arts in New York City, the first-semester interdisciplinary seminar taken by all freshmen enrolled in the recently formed Macaulay Honors College of the City University of New York, exposes students to theater, opera, the visual arts, and a fourth area to be chosen at the instructor's discretion. I chose to make these performance visits the subject matter of the course and to introduce the students to the arts by preparing them extensively before each event and then requiring them to write and revise critical papers describing and evaluating what they had seen. When I look back at some of the work students produced, I marvel what I expected of my students. I was trying to help them become critics of art forms to which they had only recently been introduced. Although they live in New York City, many of the students are recent immigrants; most of them live in boroughs other than Manhattan; and street-smart though most of them are, outside of organized school attendance at museums, they had surprisingly little prior acquaintance with any of the art forms studied. The course demands and the sheer volume of work daunted them. Yet their final course evaluations indicated their pride in what they had learned and their increased appreciation of at least some of the art forms encountered along the way. Some years later, I now realize how much an online discussion board facilitated the development of a capacity that has been called "aesthetic literacy," a term that may be defined in a myriad of ways. For my students, it meant judging an encounter with the arts by cultivating habits of thought that encourage independent thinking; such self-reliance emerged as students became sensitive to the relation between ethnic and artistic culture, to the significance of genre, and to the way that art embodies feeling and thought.

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I About VKP: In all, more than seventy faculty from twenty-two institutions participated in the Visible Knowledge Project over five years. Participating campuses included five research universities (Vanderbilt University, the University of Alabama, Georgetown University, the University of Southern California, Washington State University, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), four comprehensive public universities (Pennsylvania's Millersville University, California State University (CSU)--Monterey Bay, CSU Sacramento, Ohio's Youngstown State University, and participants from several four-year colleges in the City University of New York system, including City College, Lehman, and Baruch), and three community colleges (two from CUNY--Borough of Manhattan Community College and LaGuardia Community College, and California's Cerritos College). In addition to campus-based teams, a number of independent scholars participated from a half dozen other institutions, such as Arizona State and Lehigh University. The project began in June 2000 and concluded in October 2005. We engaged in several methods for online collaboration to supplement our annual institutes, including an adaptation of the digital poster-tool created by Knowledge Media Lab (Carnegie Foundation), asynchronous discussion, and web-conferencing. The VKP galleries and archives (<https://digitalcommons.georgetown.edu/blogs/vkp/>) provide a wealth of background information, including lists of participants, regular newsletters, and reports and essays by participants, as well as a number of related resources and meta-analyses. For this article, the author gratefully acknowledges the students whose work is cited here. All students whose work is included have granted the author permission to use the material.

Online discussions made it possible for my students to begin judging art and creative expression with growing assurance. Before every class, I posted four or five questions and told the students to answer two questions and respond to the comments of at least one other student. These questions were of different types: some sent the students to a primary text; some asked them to explain the argument in a piece of academic or critical prose; and some were more open-ended, asking them to reflect. For each unit, I returned to a set of vocabulary-building questions that were intended to help the students see that different artistic forms and media shared some fundamental concerns: “rhythm,” “balance,” “composition,” and the like may refer to color, melody, or strings of words, but ultimately they enunciate aesthetic criteria that define experiences and objects in which participants and observers find beauty.

Since the hallmark of Honors students is conscientiousness, almost all of them contributed copiously to the online discussions. At first, their responses were dutiful rather than probing, but eventually they began to establish individual and distinct voices. A most revealing set of student comments, elicited at the end of the semester, responded to this prompt: “Which of the questions did you enjoy answering the most? Which did you avoid like the plague? Try to analyze your preferences. What do they tell you about the way your mind works? What approaches to knowledge do you find most congenial?”

Here is a typical answer:

*Out of all the different types of questions we were presented with, I think I enjoyed answering the questions that did not require much reading. This might stem from laziness, but I also felt more constrained by having to respond to readings. I liked the series of threads where we had a couple of questions asking us our ideas on what we were studying, such as who owns a text and what kind of relationship do the people that make up an opera have, and then a few questions asking us to analyze what we read. This balance allowed me to express my initial views on things and then read and develop a more informed view based on the material provided and also by supporting my prior speculations with credible sources and some kind of logical reasoning. I think the questions I avoided most were the ones that were too specific and asking for a definite answer because sometimes I was unsure of myself.*

The single question that they gravitated to the most, and the one most frequently recalled in their self-reflections about the discussion board, was posed at the beginning of the third course unit, on music and dance. After the students had suffered through revising their papers on opera, they had begun to develop a vocabulary for discussing the arts and a greater openness to new things. Although they had other choices, just about every student in three years that I taught The Arts in New York City wrote lengthy posts to explore these questions: “Why do people dance? What kinds of dancing are you familiar with in your own lives?” Looking closely at the wealth of material that these responses present opens a window on student learning. For at least one moment in a challenging semester, none of the students felt sheepish or inadequate when instructed to expose their thoughts in public. The depth, passion, humor, and idiosyncrasy revealed in these posts mark a high point in my students’ ability to engage with the arts. I had asked them general questions like this in class earlier in the semester: why do artists create imaginative work? The answer tended to be quick and brief: to express themselves. If prodded, the students who had thought about their reading might produce more specific details about what O’Neill, say, was doing in *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, or Van Gogh in his self-portraits. Still the evidence was newly mined and tentatively put forth.

No such hesitation marks the answers to the question online about dance, which had not been officially labeled as an inquiry into the nature of the arts. Yet in spontaneously drawing on their own individual experiences and sources of information, my students were talking about profound human needs. Perhaps precisely because the question was not flagged as Important and Serious, they said what they felt. Because they had time to reflect and write out their answers, and to read their peers' posts as well, the conversation blossomed as it had not in the classroom, although many of the students at the end of the semester expressed their preference for our face-to-face discussions, which, in relatively small classes, could be free-wheeling, probing, and funny. I certainly would not claim that working through this question about dancing transformed their understanding or in itself measurably improved their subsequent writing. Rather, the richness of their replies showed what was possible. They were thinking about aesthetics with precision and specificity. For once, they had authority and expertise; they were not novices in the theater but aficionados and critics.

What did they have to say and why did these questions free them to say it? What can we learn from the verbal gestures that students make in online discussion? I would suggest that taking the time to study these answers as if they were metaphysical poetry rewards a teacher in unexpected ways: close reading of this low-stakes student writing uncovers the steps that they were taking to expand their cognitive range.

### Dialogue: How the Students Learned

"Why do people dance?" opened a door for students who had previously had trouble describing the creative impulse without resorting to clichés. The title of this essay captures the way the students embraced it. After a few students had written thoughtful answers to the question, suddenly the rubric changed. "Why do people dance?" had been altered to: "WHY SOPHIE DANCES;" an indication that the students began to claim ownership of their ideas. Student voices found a new register in explaining what they knew about dancing. Here is an abridged version of what Sophie had to say:

*There are so many reasons that people dance. Some involve religious and cultural aspects, while others are based upon pure fun and enjoyment. Personally, I feel that people can't help dancing . . . it's in their blood! . . . Whether one dances by moving just one body part or various parts simultaneously, whether one is an incredibly talented dancer or has two left feet, I still consider that to be dancing. When people dance it is a unique form of expression that could not be achieved in any other manner. I think the way a person dances can tell you a great deal about a person that you would not otherwise have discovered. I agree with Steve that dancing is also a way to clear one's mind and escape the troubles of life. Personally, I love dancing (whether I'm good at it or not is a totally different story). . . . I also love blasting the music in the bathroom and dancing [sic] the shower but I've learned from experience that that's just a bit dangerous. . . .*

The answer in itself is not so different from others, but the vivacity of this particular student shines through her comment. Some students wrote more comprehensive answers, and a few wrote much less, but this comment is sufficiently typical to analyze. On first examining their insights, I tried to see them as steps on a Platonic ladder toward higher aesthetic literacy, as if our class were a latter-day avatar of the Symposium. Upon reflection, I think it more accurate to say that answers like Sophie's demonstrate that a semester's worth of experiences and the particular opportunities that this question provided brought all the students to a new plateau of understanding. Haltingly, they began to internalize the ways in which culture, genre, and the senses inform artistic accomplishment.

In this case, Sophie, like most of her peers, thinks in multiples: people dance for “religious and cultural aspects,” for fun and enjoyment. The students’ initial sentences tend to propose at least two or three motives for dancing: entertainment, self-expression, communication (meeting people), relieving stress, demonstrating cultural pride, and for fun. After announcing their categories for analysis, as we shall see, they actually go on to explore them in some detail. The following example demonstrates how the initial effort to define contrasting motives for dancing created an opening for a student to relate what she had been exposed to in other classes and, significantly, outside of classes, to the prompt. She begins with knowledge gleaned from a recent lecture-demonstration that her history class had attended:

*People have danced throughout time for a variety of reasons, as can be seen by the many different forms dancing can take. Dances, such as the Capoeira, can have communicational [sic] purposes. Capoeira is a traditional Afro-Brazilian dance form that I recently saw performed by Ologunde at Baruch. This dance at first looks like a fluid form of martial arts, but is actually more like a game in which the two dancers move back and forth pretending to hit each other. As explained by one of the members of this dance group, Capoeira evolved during the time of slavery as a way to pass on information about escape routes. While the slave owners looked upon it as a mere dance, slaves passing by were able to interpret the hidden message, until it was finally banned by slave owners.*

She then draws on her own ethnic experience to broaden her claim: “Dancing can also be a form of story telling, as it is with traditional Indian dance. This type of dance focuses on Indian folklore and mythology. Observers can recognize a certain pose that might symbolize a god, and can follow the story presented through the movements of the dancer.” Next, she turns to ideas gleaned from an anthropology class: “Other reasons people traditionally dance are for war or celebration. An ethnic war dance before a battle is used to build up energy, create a sense of unity, and the drums are used to set a rhythm. A war dance could also be called for a celebration of victory.” And finally, she writes as a teenager growing up in the United States of America:

*Nowadays, dances are usually a result of some kind of celebration (i.e. people dance at weddings and birthday parties), or simply to express a form of happiness. Dances can be used to challenge other people, as is common in tap dancing, where one dancer may try to “out tap” another. Break dancing can also be seen as a form of competition, since people take turns dancing in the middle of a circle trying to outdo everyone else. Other social purposes for dancing include courting, and finally, some people dance simply because they feel like it.*

Although she relies on a favorite opening gambit that is generally to be deplored, “. . . throughout time for a variety of reasons,” she quickly goes on to offer elaborate, substantive illustrations of her claim. In a formal essay, one long paragraph like this would be a problem to address. But the items that the student describes are connected, despite her failure to help the reader follow a train of thought that moves, quite reasonably, from one illustration to another. The ending brings us back home to the student’s informed observation of social phenomena without any direct appeal to the personal. In all, this posting, brimming with information, expands the student’s aesthetic literacy by leading her to organize and correlate ideas that clearly come from different sources. She has not yet fully integrated these ideas—she has no overarching thesis. But to be fair, answering a discussion board prompt is not like writing a formal paper, and this first-level stab at organizing complexity successfully fostered communal awareness. One student’s correlation of ideas piqued another’s, leading the entire class to relate formal aesthetic elements to the culture that produces them.

Throughout, students comment on how much they are learning from each other. One benefit of such moments is what teachers can learn from them about alliances that have been formed or antagonisms that may have sprouted. Such insight can lead to more effective classroom management. In any event, acknowledgments of the influence the students have on each other's experience and development emerge as a threaded response. The threading records how many took the trouble to salute and thank the others for teaching them something. Tone and diction suggest that these were not the rote responses to another's comment that my directions sometimes produced, but gauges of genuine interest and mutual reinforcement. The question came late enough in the semester so that one can see the social benefit of an electronic discussion board.

Given the extraordinary diversity of our student body, the discussants' alertness to each other's posts reflect their fascination with other cultures. They happily share their own parochial perspectives and honor their peers'. In a world where otherness is too often demonized, they make a point of embracing it, at least partially because speculating about why people dance encourages an explanation of the ways that different customs embody local values. Interest in other cultures intensifies their aesthetic sensibilities. Consider, for example, the following response to the student quoted above:

*I found it very interesting the fact that you mentioned a dance that was used during slavery. I had no idea about this previously. Capoeira surely does sound like a dance that holds much respect. You made me realize that as a form of storytelling and communication this type of dancing definitely holds some sad memories. However, when performed this dance also serves as a way of remembering and admiring those past relatives who struggled through slavery. It serves as a way of honoring their griefs and showing that they have never been forgotten. Thanks for teaching me something new.*

This student, not the most articulate or sophisticated in the group, has added her own interpretation to the information provided by her peer, reflecting reading she has done outside of my class. This effort to incorporate a new piece of data into a range of ideas that are important to the respondent enlarges the potential for understanding the power of dance and of art. Impressed by the initiating student's informative but relatively impersonal account of the history of Capoeira, the responding student takes the discussion to a new level by introducing affect into the socio-political story that the first student has been told. It should be emphasized that the answering student doesn't seem fully to grasp how she has changed the direction of the initial posting. Reviewing electronic discussions of this richness can prime the teacher to pursue the psychological insight implicit in such spontaneous student reactions. In classes like mine, where the online component does not replace but rather supplements face-to-face dialogue, reading student posts before the class meets arms the teacher with matter to bring to the class's attention and expand on in real time.

Like the student who intuited the pathos of the slave dance, we may not always grasp how much we are revealing about ourselves in redirecting a conversation. By and large, however, a common feature of the postings was a heightened physical self-awareness that informs aesthetic judgment. Many, including the eponymous Sophie, deprecate their own abilities, but because the question validates the relevance of their experience, they do not risk embarrassment by admitting shortcomings. The importance of dancing as a means of relieving stress is a recurrent theme. Typically, a student reflects: "Dancing is a harmless form of entertainment, it is much better to go to a club and dance the night away, rather than doing drugs or going out there and doing bad things. I enjoy dancing because it takes my mind away from what is bothering me; also after studying for a long

time dancing is very relaxing and calms my nerves.” The poignancy here triggered other confessions; this theme recurred in each of the three years.

Often, analogies help students to pinpoint the nature of their idiosyncratic participation in dancing. The next response follows the pattern we have seen before, by proposing “scores of reasons” why people dance, but here, self-reflection and a sensitivity to environment lead the student to formulate aesthetic judgments by working from his personal understanding. While in formal writing one would urge the student to avoid shifting from the second to the third person, in this kind of online forum an attentive reader can discern from that shift how the initial personal reaction enabled a more distanced critical comment: “I believe people dance for scores of reasons. One reason could be simply for fun. The feeling of enjoyment that you get from the movement of your body to music that you like is analogous to the fun you have playing sports.” This analogy to sports suggests the sheer physical exhilaration associated with dancing. As the response develops, the student begins to tackle the complexity of adolescent romance, and the rest of this answer ruefully reflects on how difficult it is to grow up (the reference to “a natural high,” for example, reminds us that some students seek refuge in unnatural stimulants).

*Stemming from that main reason, people dance sometimes to express the feelings that they have for one another (when couples dance) or to show off their skills to the crowd. People might dance to get lost in the music as well, giving themselves a natural high, which takes them away from the stress and troubles that exist in their lives outside of the dance floor.*

A critique of human motives follows:

*On the shallower side, people might dance in order to impress others because having the will to dance and dancing well is something that requires practice and culture (e.g. merengue, salsa, reggae, “grinding”). People also dance as a way of breaking the ice when trying to meet someone. A guy might start dancing with a girl he never met before or vice versa on the dance floor and hope to get to know her better from there (or something to that end).*

This student analyzes the formulaic reference to “fun” more subtly than most. Linking dancing to sports emphasizes the centrality of the body in the experience of dance. In contrast to the student who drew examples from formal study of Capoeira and Indian dance, this student spins his proliferation of reasons for dancing out of personal experience.

Another young man more succinctly captured the impulse that brings us to dance, here moving back and forth between third and first person. These shifts suggest how we learn in areas where there are no set answers—we feel and then we look around us and therefore, we generalize. “People dance simply to express what they are feeling at a given time. Examples in life are: sometimes after a test where [sic] I did very well on I feel like dancing, or after someone scores a touchdown in football they do a little dance.”

And a young woman speaks out of her own quite different sense of the physicality of dance:

*People dance because they want to express themselves. Body motion conveys the feelings of a dancer to the audience or the fellow dancers. It is a way to show how you are unique. The feeling I get when dancing is unlike anything else I experience. It feels like I am flying, like I am graceful, and I am a part of a whirl, rotating me, throwing me around.*

These comments give witness to the writers' ability to extrapolate from their own experience. Looking inward at themselves, they find outward comparisons to explain why they--why people--dance. What they describe brings us closer to primal, even pre-cultural (and in these cases clearly gendered) feelings and thus to understanding the deep roots of an art form.

In all of these posts, we find detailed observations of the sort that characterize good prose. Sophie's adventures in the shower offer a case in point, as does the way one young woman memorably evoked the physical means by which ballroom dancers communicate: "I happened to learn most of my dances as a leader. That means, that I am the one setting up the pace, and I should practically reign supreme over my follower. It is exciting, when you think up of a move, and make your follower go through it by pushing on her back, or squeezing her hand. It's a feeling of accomplishment."

Another young woman, of Chinese extraction, pointed with pictorial clarity to patterns of movement that she had noticed:

*Through dancing, we can learn the many aspects of all the different cultures in the world. For instance, the traditional Chinese dances involve mostly the movement of the wrist, the ankles, and the neck. On the other hand, some of the Middle Eastern dances involve more of the movement of the hips. This apparent difference illustrates the many differences and similarities between the two cultures.*

What in fact does such detail tell us about the differences between Middle Eastern and Chinese culture? Another student hazarded a judgment: "Whether it be the sexuality of the belly dancer with the constant pelvic thrusts, or the sensual dances (or ritual) of bridesmaids circling their grooms on their wedding nights, both these kinds of ancient dances symbolize history and ones [sic] past." These freshmen stop short of full analysis, but the precision with which they allow their readers to see posture and attitude exhibits critical skills of a high order. Their success in capturing ephemeral images that occupy and then fade from time and space prepare the ground for a deeper investigation of their meaning. They have learned to pay attention.

Finally, as we see students reach toward first formulations of individual taste, we find responses that begin to recognize the unique qualities of dance as an art form that inhabits the body. To define generic awareness was one of the main themes of our evolving discussion. From the start, I had emphasized the visceral component of art. If the students were uneasy with what seemed to them over-intellectualizing "fun," they were nevertheless ready to explore the relationship between music and dance by listening to the scores to which the ballets we were to attend were set and to discover that that relationship could be vexed indeed. They took for granted the physical compulsion to move to a beat (at least two students mentioned the link between musical meters and the beat of the heart). They found words to get to the heart of the matter, which paradoxically has to do with the irrelevance of words:

*Music and dance are very powerful forces, which can bring out different parts of an individual's personality, which he/she never knew they had. Dancing allows you to say anything you want, without any restraints, which is sometimes very hard to do through words. In other words, dance is a sort of freedom, allowing dancers to truly express themselves during the process.*

Another puts it this way: "Dance is just as expressive an art form as literature or opera or performance. Dance doesn't include spoken words. Therefore it is a universal language. The universality of movement and emotions is transfigured into a beautiful eye-pleasing view." A third student challenged this response, not fully recognizing the clichéd characterization of dance as a universal language. The most compelling of these statements, like the first two quoted above, were written by young women who had been born in Russia and had rather extensive exposure to ballet and ballroom dancing. The dissident voice seemed to want to defend against his unwarranted inference that Americans were being unfavorably compared to Russians, so the second writer tried again:

*Dance is a universal language in the sense that bodily movements give meaning to emotions. Ballets do not involve words usually, just music, so a person from the US can go see a Russian ballet and understand the bodily language. They would feel the universal movements of love, anger, leaping across the stage, earth bound creatures, and those that extend towards the gods. . . . For example a person lying on the floor to show pain through the bodies [sic] movements, would be easily understood by the audience. . . . Dance doesn't need language (verbal) therefore it is essentially universal.*

Not surprisingly, those students who knew the art form best were the most likely to decry what they saw as violations of its essence. In other words, they had enough understanding and background to propose an aesthetic code and explain what it entailed:

*I was sent to ballet school when I was five. . . . The modern style of dancing is not very appealing to me. It leaves very little room for being inventive and is too vulgar. Dancing in this fashion resembles pornography rather than romantic love making which can be expressed in a less vulgar fashion. What I learned about movement is that the whole body adds to the impression one makes, therefore, every finger, every hip, muscle, bone, has to continue motion and never skip a beat. Even if the legs are still, there is so much possibility for the rest of the body to move, perhaps the hips, the back, the arms. . . . But most importantly facial expressions define a dancer. If a dancer feels the mood of the music, it can be seen on their face. If they want to express sexuality, all they have to do is use the eyes and maybe lips to define it. A deep, sexy stare before a turn implies flirtation. A smile or a gasp can imply a well-choreographed feeling that the dancers evoke in their partners and audience.*

One need not agree with these judgments to sense the authority, born of performance experience, with which they are pronounced.

Another student, less sure of herself and of her own abilities, nevertheless came very close to articulating the purity of the aesthetic impulse and integrating her course work with her personal observations. She had been dancing for years, she explained, but for her own reasons:

*Every year, I would change the types of dance I took—acrobatics, jazz, ballet, tap, club-date classes, & something weird that required me to be shoeless. I switched dance studios every few years, out of convenience, and I noticed that, despite the studio I attended, most of the people were very ambitious and competitive. The annual recitals involved rigorous training and practice. Personally, I enjoyed the classes, even at this intense stage. My motives for dancing were much different than [sic] those around me— I danced for enjoyment while others felt pressed to distinguish themselves and participate in additional competitions and such. . . . While I was reading the handout about ballet costumes, and how they have become more revealing in order for the spectators to pay attention to all the steps and leg movements, I feel now their purpose is to attract people and make the dancers uncomfortable. I have no idea how many costumes I have stashed away with unnecessary sequins, weird flamingo-type hats, and highly uncomfortable performance shoes with really high heels. I think that the concept of dance hasn't really changed a lot since its development in France. People still await all the glamour and recognition in proficiently performing dance, but I think people have lost sight of what dance is really about. Most people didn't really care if their legwork was correct, or why we were learning special steps or how these steps evolved- they were mainly focused on being the best, and being the first ones who moved up to the next class. I think most people were so wrapped up in the competitive nature that they didn't stop to enjoy dance for what it is, and appreciate its beauty and the fun it brings.*

Beauty: I am always surprised and thrilled when one of my students utters the word. To propose that one engages in an art form because of its beauty and because it is fun exemplifies the kind of aesthetic literacy that I hoped my students would achieve. In ways that I've sketched out here, questions on a discussion board drawing from personal experience and academic study enabled the development of that sensibility in ways that I had not consciously planned.

### Epilogue: What the Teacher Learned

What did I learn about online discussion from this serendipitous question about dance? What difference does inquiry make? As a lens on the process by which students learn, online entries may be a better gauge of student progress than formal papers. The social nature of online discussion encouraged students to stretch their abilities. When I assign a cumulative value to the 10% of the course grade devoted to online discussion, most students earn the A that they would so desperately love to have for the course as a whole. It's important to recognize, however, that one looks for the other 90% in more formal evidence of learning and that the very strengths of online discussion imply its limits as well. The ideas that online discussion can bring to the surface need to be refined in ways that can only be accomplished in a finished essay. All questions should not be as user friendly as the dance question, because students do also need to grapple with the harder questions they prefer to avoid. Mastering difficult concepts and deciphering subtleties in argument are intellectual skills that need cultivating, too. That said, to chat in the fashion described above put the dancing feet of relatively naïve freshmen on firmer aesthetic ground than they felt beneath themselves when they started the term.

This sort of computer-mediated instruction allows students to ruminate. How do we learn, especially in the arts and humanities? What does discussion, electronic or otherwise, contribute to that process? Teachers might like to believe that once they've taught something, their students have

learned it and thus can move on, but my many years in the classroom incline me to think that there is a great gap between teaching and learning, and that without patient and frequent reinforcement, what was taught and might fleetingly have been grasped does not fully inform our students' understanding. Talking about what has been taught, giving students opportunities to paraphrase and rephrase lessons presumably learned, is essential—hence, discussion both strengthens students' familiarity with concepts to which they have already been introduced and gives them a way to try transferring those concepts from the area in which they were first proposed to other related contexts.

Working on this project has made me more and more conscious of how much matter may be gleaned from a careful reading of one's students' contributions to an online forum. I have also begun to use electronic resources in more open-ended ways. For many purposes, I still prefer to control the discussion by posing online questions. But if the discussion board was cutting-edge pedagogy ten years ago, it now seems outdated, for the ethos of Web 2.0 has overtaken us all, and students have become used to generating new knowledge. Wikis and blogs and non-verbal media can harness that process so that students more quickly take ownership of materials that we want them to absorb.

Having seen how much my students loved answering "easy" questions, in freshman writing, I have instituted a blog that invites weekly commentary on apparently random topics that ultimately become the focus of a formal paper due some weeks after the original blog entries have been written. Their own insights became source material for arguments in a course where an emphasis on library research only may deaden student voices. Having seen how the physical experience of an art form gave students standards for judging that they (and I) almost failed to cultivate, in my upper-level Shakespeare course, I have asked students to work on scene-study projects, in which they rehearse short scenes and videotape them, upload the tapes so that the whole class can watch their "performances," and then speak as critics about the material they have just worked through as actors. At first nervous about asking students who are by and large not native speakers of English to undertake these dramatic readings, I have been amazed by the gusto with which they fulfill this assignment. Speaking the words and visualizing the scenes have brought them into Shakespeare's imagined worlds as no amount of textual analysis on its own has done. I have just watched with delight a grainy student tape in which Shylock stands before an ATM machine moaning about daughters and ducats; this seems to me an extraordinary example of embodied learning.

To end with a caveat: higher education ultimately requires us to look beyond our own experience and certain kinds of questions help learners integrate what they have experienced with what they have studied. We should not give up asking hard and specific questions; we teach because we want our students to acquire knowledge and to be able to expound its meaning and importance. But we can most profitably mix those questions with the speculative and experiential as well. Each one of us dances for our own reasons, but they are reasons with which others can empathize. Each one of us knows more than we think we know. Jonathan Swift's acerbic eighteenth-century contrast between the spider and the bee can be appropriated as a metaphor for the mixture of self-generated, collaborative, and scholarly learning that contemporary pedagogy should promote. To the spider web of individual opinions that threads on a discussion board represent, team work and academic research add a honeycomb that grows cell by cell, full of sweetness and capable of promoting light. Learning at its most profound is an organic process that the mechanical tools of twenty-first-century pedagogy can expedite and encourage.

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