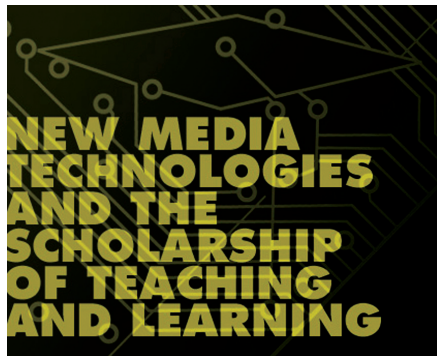




## The Difference that Inquiry Makes:

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

Edited By Randy Bass & Bret Eynon



**"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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# Table of Contents

## **The Difference that Inquiry Makes:**

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

### **Capturing the Visible Evidence of Invisible Learning (Introduction and Synthesis of Findings)**

*Randy Bass and Bret Eynon*

### **Reading the Reader**

*Sharona Levy*

### **Close Reading, Associative Thinking, and Zones of Proximal Development in Hypertext**

*Patricia E. O'Connor*

### **Inquiry, Image, and Emotion in the History Classroom**

*Peter Felten*

### **From Looking to Seeing: Student Learning in the Visual Turn**

*David Jaffee*

### **Engaging Students as Researchers through Internet Use**

*Taimi Olsen*

### **Trace Evidence: How New Media Can Change What We Know About Student Learning**

*Lynne Adrian*

### **Shaping a Culture of Conversation: The Discussion Board and Beyond**

*Edward J. Gallagher*

### **The Importance of Conversation in Learning and the Value of Web-based Discussion Tools**

*Heidi Elmendorf and John Ottenhoff*

### **Why Sophie Dances: Electronic Discussions and Student Engagement with the Arts**

*Paula Berggren*

### **Connecting the Dots: Learning, Media, Community**

*Elizabeth Stephen*

### **Focusing on Process: Exploring Participatory Strategies to Enhance Student Learning**

*Juan-José Gutiérrez*

### **Theorizing Through Digital Stories: The Art of "Writing Back" and "Writing For"**

*Rina Benmayor*

### **Video Killed the Term Paper Star? Two Views**

*Peter Burkholder and Anne Cross*

### **Producing Audiovisual Knowledge: Documentary Video Production and Student Learning in the American Studies Classroom**

*Bernie Cook*

### **Multimedia as Composition: Research, Writing, and Creativity**

*Viet Nguyen*

### **Looking at Learning, Looking Together: Collaboration across Disciplines on a Digital Gallery**

*Joseph Ugoretz and Rachel Theilheimer*

### **"It Helped Me See a New Me": ePortfolio, Learning and Change at LaGuardia Community College**

*Bret Eynon*

### **From Narrative to Database: Protocols and Practices of Multimedia Inquiry in a Cross-Classroom Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Study**

*Michael Coventry and Matthias Oppermann*

### **Multimedia in the Classroom at USC: A Ten Year Perspective**

*Mark E. Kann*

## *Connecting the Dots: Learning, Media Community*

*Elizabeth Stephen, Georgetown University*

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*

### Introduction

This is a story told in several parts, which unfolded over a several-year period. The story began in 2001; I had just joined the Visible Knowledge Project (VKP) and I was preparing to teach a new freshman proseminar on immigration in a new academic home. I had never taught an undergraduate class, much less a freshman class. In addition, I was a novice learner when it came to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). In spite of assurances that I was part of a nationwide community of scholars, I felt very lost and unsure of my way.

I started with a simple question about the intersection of technology and student learning: how does film affect student learning? Because the courses I had taught previously had all relied on written text to convey information to students, I was curious to know how film would facilitate or detract from student learning. As a part of my research for the Visible Knowledge Project, I gathered student evidence to help answer that loosely formed question. In addition to written assignments I gathered other forms of student evidence: 1. written student feedback elicited numerous times during the semester; 2. a “think aloud” session where five students watched film clips while being asked to respond to what they were seeing; and 3. taped individual interviews about the content of the course. From these sources I began to examine whether and how film led to a broader and deeper understanding of immigration.

The student evidence from this first offering of the course was as sketchy as the broad question I had posed. I couldn’t really answer the question of whether film added or detracted from student learning, but I realized it was not the question that needed to be answered, or at least not the question I wanted to answer.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

When I taught the course for a second time I focused on the question of whether the order in which students encountered film and text mattered in the learning process. As I analyzed the student work, I wondered if by altering the order of film and text perhaps I was sending a message to the students that one medium was not privileged over the other? In an English course, one might always expect the written text first, which would privilege text automatically. In a course such as this, however, it was advantageous to alter the order so that film illuminated text in some units, while text illuminated film in other units. I found that this mix of ordering required students to read both film and text more closely because both were defamiliarized. Students were required to read both film and text more critically in order to piece together the immigrant experience.

As I analyzed the student evidence from the second offering of the course, I began to realize that a critical component to the success of the students' integration of material was that the students became reflective learners through my questioning of their reading techniques. It was through the engagement of students as part of the research project that the students achieved a more in-depth reading and a more thorough understanding of text and film throughout the semester.

The third time I taught the proseminar I had a lively group of students who developed a group identity very quickly. I wondered if this was unique to this group of students, or what aspects of the course design enhanced or detracted from the sense of being part of a community. Furthermore, were there benefits of community building that would enhance student learning? I began to realize that my quest was really about developing an authentic community of scholars, and that once I had a better understanding of that process, then the more minor aspects of course content would fall into place.

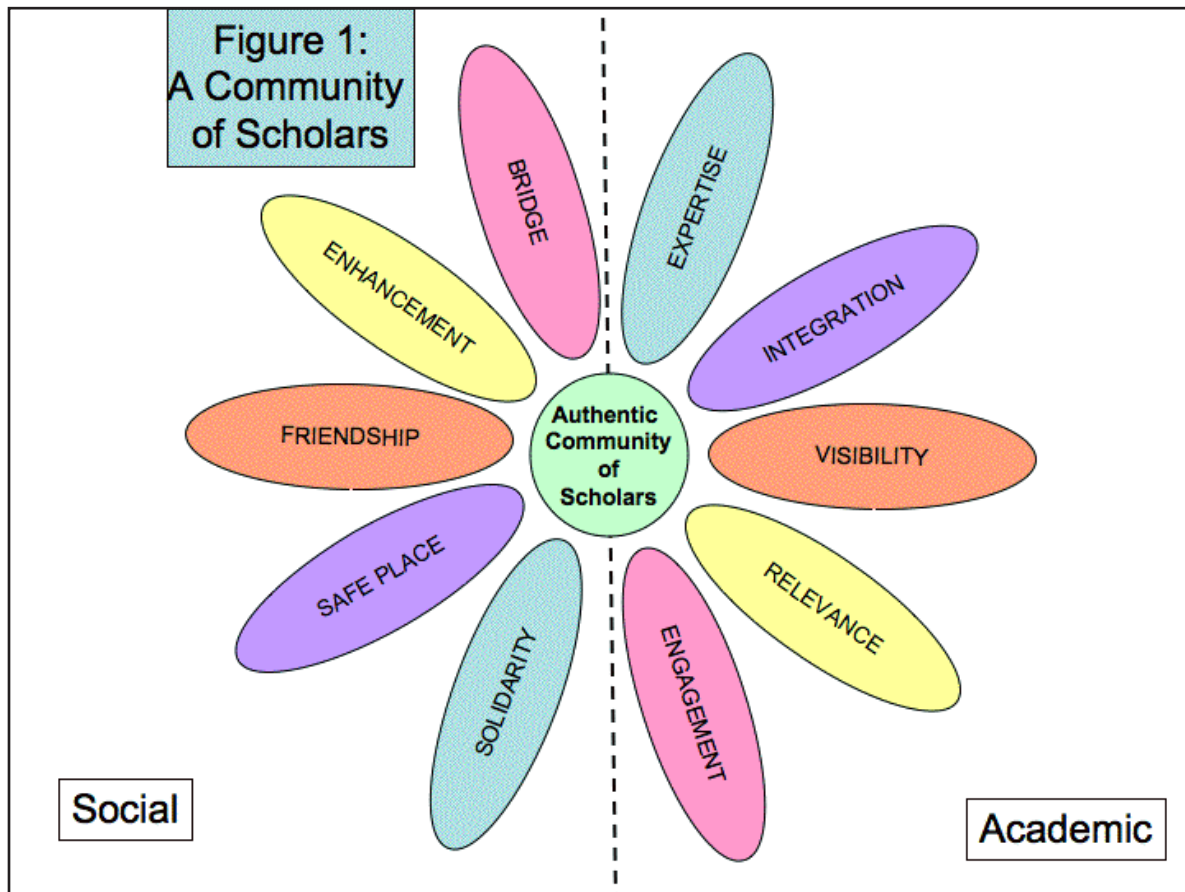
### Developing a Community of Scholars

As a result of this introspection and with encouragement from my dean's office and financial support through the Georgetown University Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship (CNDLS), I embarked on a very ambitious project. Starting with the third iteration of the proseminar, I decided to take each of my freshmen proseminar classes across the four-year curriculum by offering courses to the same group of students when they were sophomores and seniors. I opted to utilize different methodologies to study immigration at a deeper and more complex level in each subsequent course. For the sophomore class I used an ethnographic approach in which the Georgetown students worked with immigrant students in one of two Washington D.C. schools on a photo essay. Many Georgetown students study abroad during their junior year, so at first I was puzzled as to how to foster the sense of the community of scholars while they were away from the main campus. I settled on assigning the students to write blogs while they were abroad; they were given technology awards to purchase either a camera or an iPod with which to enhance their missives. The capstone experience was a senior course in which the students conducted original research using qualitative and/or quantitative methods and produced a thesis-length research paper on some aspect of immigration.

Although I now have an additional three cohorts in various stages of this process, I focus here on my findings from the first cohort who inspired me to examine the benefits of fostering a community of scholars. My original cohort has now graduated from Georgetown and in fact, they did stay together in some form across their four years.

I asked this cohort in April of their senior year to reflect on: What has it meant to be a part of this community of scholars? Several of you have taken three classes with me—what has it meant to look at immigration through three different sets of lenses? What has it meant to you to be in class with the same group of people over four years? What relationships, if any, have you developed

with members of the class? From the comments in the student reflections about the social and academic components of the community of scholars, I have devised a schematic (with thanks to Randy Bass and Heidi Elmendorf for the original concept) that highlights the binding elements of this community. Although I have divided the components into social and academic, there are probably components that straddle both elements. Let me describe each of the components of a Community of Scholars represented in Figure 1, first for the academic side, then the social.



### Academic

**EXPERTISE:** By taking three courses over four years with the same professor on one topic, but each through a different lens (literary analysis, ethnography, quantitative or qualitative independent research) the students developed expertise in immigration, or at least one subtopic.

**INTEGRATION:** Each student integrated their courses on immigration through various projects (portfolio, documentary, blog, thesis) as well as integrating material from other courses, and perhaps most importantly with their activities outside of classroom walls, including teaching in a public/charter school and various internships and club activities.

**VISIBILITY:** All of the students worked on group projects, and all students worked on projects that were visible to classmates, as well as to the outside world. As freshmen the students prepared web pages on one immigration topic, as sophomores they produced documentaries, as juniors they wrote blogs while abroad, and as seniors they prepared their portfolios. In addition, the students published work in a common, visible space: Blackboard as freshmen, a class blog as sophomores,

and their individual blogs as juniors abroad. In addition, I have a class page on my Web site where their work as individuals and groups is portrayed.

**RELEVANCE:** The subject of immigration was very topical; it was very much in the news. It was also a topic that allowed me to utilize different pedagogies and for the students to use different disciplines to approach the subject. Students were who immigrants themselves and/or children of immigrants engaged with the topic, but so did students who were not immigrants. It was a rich area of study that allowed the class to move from passive learners to engaged scholars.

**ENGAGEMENT:** Some students immediately engaged with the material as immigrants themselves, while other students began to see the significance of immigration in the global context and their relationship to the broad topic. When the students were working with the community partners, they engaged in the topic of immigration by seeing the lives of middle and high school students living in the nation's capital. The students utilized film and paper to capture the narrative of their engagement. The blog project allowed the students to reflect on their time abroad as an immigrant and to link their academic work abroad with classes back at Georgetown.

## Social

**BRIDGE:** At the beginning of building a community of scholars, this cohort was very important as a bridge between high school and college, and from their families to their new friends at Georgetown. As time went on, the proseminar continued to be a bridge to new topics, new courses, new friends, and new adventures at Georgetown.

**ENHANCEMENT:** Social activities enhanced the curriculum and bonded the group. For instance, during the proseminar unit where we focused on Chinese immigration I brought the students to Wheaton, Maryland for an authentic Dim Sum meal. One member of the class was from Singapore and Hong Kong so she ordered for us as we all sat around a round table, placing the chicken feet and dumplings on a lazy susan. Many members of the class had never had Dim Sum and the entire experience was a fascination. Afterwards the students fanned out through the area and some found ethnic stores where they could buy foods from home, including an Armenian grocery store and a place selling flags from all over the world. In a reflection one student characterized the group experience so profoundly:

*When I woke up on Saturday morning, I had no idea of what was about to come. Dim Sum. I'd heard it was wonderful, that you ate a lot and that it was basically a Hong Kong-style buffet. Dim Sum. The closest literal translation, according to Maple, is 'snacks.' I had no idea of the magnitude of the word until later in the afternoon.*

*As we all entered the restaurant, it was obvious that we were "Um, a bit out of place." Upon looking around, I realized our table was the only table that had a blonde, an African-American, and basically, a motley assortment of people whom the vast majority was not Asian. I, however, did not feel out of place at all. With Maple's translation and help in ordering and explaining the food items, and the company that surrounded me, I felt right at home.*

*As the plates started coming, I admit I felt a bit greedy because I wanted to try everything. Dim Sum. Snacks. A bit of everything. As I was eating I was struck by the metaphorical meaning of Dim Sum in my life. Dim Sum. Snacks. A bit of everything, on the table around it. The pan-fried pork-and-chive dumplings, beef shu mai, and rice-noodle crepes. And that's just the beginning. A Greek a Texan, a Mexican, and a Singaporean. A*

*half Chinese-Cuban, an Armenian.  
And that's just the beginning.*

*As we sat around the table looking at the delicacies I couldn't help thinking about how each of us were like the food we were eating: some more 'exotic', others less esoteric, but still amazing. And like the snacks, we are just starting to get a taste of each other. Chrysa amazes me with her spontaneity, just as the sweet bread surprised me with its amazing chicken interior. Andrew strikes me with his candor and strong beliefs just as the white beef balls, spiced with hot sauce and "Chinese soy sauce, how appropriate" struck with their strong and astounding taste. Karen is sweet like the yolk custard...the metaphor could go on with everyone, as they are all amazing. WE are all amazing. As the food passed around the table, I also realized how blessed we were, like the food, also given to us, each of us picking a bit of this, more of that.*

**FRIENDSHIP:** Several members of the class made their best friends in the proseminar. Two members were roommates for the following three years; two people went to the same study abroad program; there was one couple that lasted for three years. Several students wrote in their reflection piece that their best friends came from this class. These friends might have found one another anyway, but the class facilitated the friendship early on in their Georgetown days.

**SAFE PLACE:** This could also be called home base. From the first days, the proseminar was established to be a safe place where any and all topics could be discussed with respect among all members. Students came to me with every kind of major and minor social and academic problem. Because we had so many academic and social interactions over the four years, all the students knew they had a safe place to retreat to when needed. I also believe the students offered each other that same safety when they needed to discuss critical issues with one another, or find solace.

**SOLIDARITY:** The proseminar gave the students a sense of belonging to something very special. The Immigrant Ethnography class added to that solidarity because ours was the ONLY Sunday night class on campus and it gave everyone something to talk about. Our combined social and academic events also were the envy of other students: we were the Proseminarians, Ethnographers, and Immigration Researchers. We knew there were other students doing these activities, but this is who "we" were. They students were all aware that they belonged to a group that was larger than themselves.

## Summary

Did the community of scholars benefit everyone? I believe it may have had a larger impact for some students than others, but in the student reflections everyone reported a benefit to being part of the cohort. I benefited from getting to know the students as people, rather than as students that I had in only one course. Academically there was a tremendous benefit because I was able to start each class at a level that would have not been possible if the students didn't already know one another. For instance, the sophomore-level Immigrant Ethnography class would not have been able to work so seamlessly in the public schools if the students didn't already have the trust and camaraderie of having been together as freshmen, or at least I would have had to intervene more frequently and more intensely. The blog worked during the junior year because the students felt beholden for having received the technology grant and because they knew that everyone else from the community of scholars was reading their blog entries. The one-semester senior-level research seminar was facilitated by me e-mailing each student over the summer to ensure that each student had a research topic ready on the first day of class. This eliminated at least a month of flailing about, and could not have been accomplished if I did not know the students ahead of time.



Will the community of scholars continue for this cohort now that they have left the confines of Georgetown? I think it would be hard to sustain it in its current form, but I suspect there will be lasting academic and social benefits that accrue to the students as they start their adult lives in a global environment that requires collaborative work styles.

Although I had moved far from my original VKP question about the sequence of film and text, it was the process of paying attention to course design, eliciting reflective responses from students, and taking the time to reflect on student learning at a deeper level that led me to test innovative strategies and to develop a community of scholars. In turn, making student learning visible required me to restructure student assignments and student communication to occur in a public place, which facilitated and strengthened the community. My on-going requests for reflection required the students to be responsible for their learning and to be conscious of connecting their various activities inside and outside of the classroom into a coherent whole. An authentic community of scholars is the embodiment of higher education and is one of the enduring outcomes of the Visible Knowledge Project.