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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The Difference That Inquiry Makes, Bass and Eynon
Looking at Learning, Looking Together: Collaboration across Disciplines on a Digital Gallery

Joseph Ugoretz, Macaulay Honors College of the City University of New York, and Rachel Theilheimer, Borough of Manhattan Community College/City University of New York

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

This is the story of how both we and our students developed adaptive expertise and participated in embodied and situated pedagogies. The context for our story is a large (about 19,000 students) urban community college with open admissions. The students come with a wide range of educational experiences. Some are recent immigrants with strong educations, even advanced degrees, from their home countries and in their own languages. Others are recent high school graduates—and many of the students never completed high school or graduated long ago and are returning to school after years of working and raising families.

We each work in disciplines which are on “opposite” sides of the career preparation/academic preparation boundary of the community college. Rachel’s course is an introduction to early childhood education, and Joe’s course is an introduction to literature. Yet we found, through our Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) work together, that our goals for our students and the best methods for working towards those goals are similar. Our story is driven by this question: How do we combine, in a sixty-credit degree, all the diverse skills that students need to succeed? With the constraints we face, how do we prepare them for successful professional work as child care teachers, or nurses, or bookkeepers—or to continue on to an advanced academic degree? Although we had already investigated this question independently of one another, collaboration on a digital gallery of student work deepened our understanding of the question and gave us new insights into some answers.

Our Teaching and Our Students’ Work

Every time Joe teaches the introduction to literature course, a major goal for him is to help students to see poetry as something worth their investment. In addition, he aims to help them to understand

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1 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.
that experiencing a poem goes beyond defining vocabulary words and grasping the literal meaning. In teaching literature, one of the major skills Joe works on with students is critical thinking—looking beyond the surface understanding, into the deeper analysis to see not just “what happens” in a poem or play or story, but how and why an author is making that happen.

As a step towards these goals, Joe decided to have students create digital poetry projects, choosing a poem and presenting it with sounds and images which the students would select to fit their interpretations of the poem’s meaning. In these projects, as students decide how to present a poem digitally, they make concrete choices. Their decisions proceed through a series of logical instances, each one under the control of the student herself. Joe wants his instructions for these projects to function not as a recipe, where the outcome is known, but as a kind of scaffolding to support students in building the meaning of the poem for themselves, seeing multiple possible interpretations, especially those which go beyond the literal, choosing among them, and making connections between the interpretations and the text of the poem.

Rachel’s major goal in the introduction to early childhood education class is to expose students to the many topics of the course, while helping them to see the depth and complexity each set of issues raises. Just as Joe wants students to dig beneath the surface of a poem, Rachel hopes students will go beyond their common-sense understanding of children and take their study of early childhood seriously using the tools of the academy. In keeping with this goal, the students investigate one topic through a story they tell about their own childhood and rewrite it in the form of a multimedia presentation. In these stories, students use hyperlinks to connect specific points to theoretical or professional principles that they discover through research. Rachel hopes students will grapple with the theories that ground early childhood education and that they will develop and situate their own theories in the academic discourse of early childhood as well as other disciplines.

Three themes emerged from both our projects, which represent the key findings of the Visible Knowledge Project as a whole:

• Development of adaptive expertise: The students’ use of new media (creating multimedia and hypertext representations of their experiences with the course content) enabled us to see how they thought about the subject matter we were teaching. As they worked on the projects we saw the development of their thinking and their growing intellectual agility and willingness to see from multiple perspectives.

• Embodied pedagogy: The projects engaged students’ affect, as well as their intellect, as we observed when they persisted in wrestling with problems and defending their choices.

• Situated pedagogy: As students worked together on the projects and presented the finished work to an audience of peers about whom they had come to care, they grew into a community of practice, where authentic learning took place.

Looking Together—Moving to the Gallery
With our separate student projects and individual findings about them, we decided to look at each other’s student work together. Coming from different vantage points, we hoped to learn with and from each other about the larger question of combining the skills students need for careers with the intellectual work of higher education. We wanted to publish our research in a way that foregrounded the students’ work and captured the polyphonic nature of our collaboration, and so developed a digital
We found that as we looked at one another’s findings, we saw how they related to our own students’ projects and illuminated the above themes.

For example, Rachel found that the language students used to discuss their stories of a childhood experience indicated that they were adopting the vocabulary of the field. Joe noticed that his students were not using the vocabulary of experienced literary critics or the specific terms that are useful for discussing poetry. Both of us saw how the vocabulary of a discipline could act as a set of tools that students can use to enter the conversation of a discipline and begin to achieve adaptive expertise. For community college students, who do not have a great deal of academic experience, the fact that different disciplines have their own vocabularies may be new to them, and understanding this fact allows them to approach a range of disciplines with increased agility and confidence.

Joe found that the process of working on the multimedia projects, making choices and decisions incrementally in class, promoted students’ opportunities for collaborative understanding. Multimedia work seemed to be more open to shared decision-making and debating interpretations than work with writing alone. There were more obvious “parts” to the exercise than a paper would have, so students who worked on their projects during class could turn to each other at various junctures to offer one another aesthetic and technical assistance. Rachel, too, saw how such situated pedagogy created the conditions for authentic learning and decided to create more in-class opportunities for students to work on their stories with input from one another.

We saw that our students’ work exemplified embodied pedagogy as they engaged with the projects to a depth and with a level of commitment which was unprecedented in our experience. One of Joe’s students, attending class with a broken finger from competing in the Olympic judo trials, removed his splint every day he worked on his digital poetry project, apparently ignoring the pain. The affective involvement with this endeavor was so compelling to him and the other students that they protested the end of class.

Findings from Student Work--Connections, Complexity, Content and Commitment

As we viewed and reviewed students’ work, we developed four categories for the ways in which their projects met our goals. We called these “the four C’s”: Connections, Complexity, Content, and Commitment. As the examples below illustrate, the first three C’s, Connections, Complexity and Content, demonstrate students’ developing adaptive expertise. They draw from and feed into the final C, Commitment, which speaks directly to both situated and embodied pedagogies.

Connections. Both of our projects ask students to make associations between what others have written (a poem or professional literature) and what they themselves think and have lived. We want them to see the relationship between their analyses of poetry and personal histories and the theoretical approaches of the experts in the fields. We hope that in addition they will make text-to-text connections, recognizing the conversations within the discipline and between disciplines.

For example, in “Never-Never” the student author makes clear connections between the visuals and each line of the poem, in a way that helps her viewers to see additional relationships themselves. She introduces an image that is not in the poem, but that connects to her life in a way that deepens the reading of the poem. She chooses images that connect to emotions if not to the literal meaning of the line, as when she pairs a photo of a disconsolate looking woman with “Missing is a pain in everyplace making a toothache out of a day.” Such emotional connections are vital to the way poetry works, and they parallel Rachel’s students’ research-story links.
“My First Mistake” is a story in which a teacher blames a child for an innocent mistake. In it, the student author shifts perspectives and relates them to each other as she writes from the child’s perspective, then looks at the teacher’s perspective, and is able to move to the perspective of a generic teacher who can see the child’s perspective. In so doing, she connects to a constellation of different topics and ideas beyond her personal experience, finding approaches to similar problems or experiences that she may face as a teacher. Just as Joe’s student makes some surprising connections in “Never-Never,” in “My First Mistake” the student author links her story creatively to information that initially might seem unrelated to her story. The connections become obvious, though, once she ties them logically to her story and to each other.

We found that in student presentations such as these, student authors not only connect to texts, both written and personal, but also make those connections explicit. In other presentations (see for example, the other two presentations in the Connections section of the Web site, student authors make connections for themselves but do not articulate the links convincingly. While we knew from the start that making connections between texts was a crucial step towards adaptive expertise, our analysis of the student data helped us to see how important it is to teach students how to explain or demonstrate these connections to others.

Complexity (http://crossroads.georgetown.edu/vkp/dportfolio/complexity/). We both want students to see multiple meanings, especially more abstract or deeper meanings, in texts of all sorts. We want them to be able to look at problems or issues or events from multiple perspectives, to understand that their first personal response is only one of a range, and then to enjoy the process of testing different ideas.

One measure of complexity is how much we can learn from the students’ work about the poem or about the issue the student researched. After watching “The Happiness” many times, we see different, intensified meanings with each viewing. The student author of this digital poetry project presents conflicting ideas on a single slide. She talks about what is on the surface and underneath, sometimes simultaneously. Her complex interpretation echoes the complexity of the poem and its subject. As she explains in her notes, she uses images such as faceless people to convey her understanding of alienation. These images can be read in different ways, just as the poem can be.

“The Day I First Met My Father” weaves together the student author’s intentions in telling the story, the story itself, what she learned from research, and a conclusion that tells where she is heading as a result. The student author adds layers of complexity to her story as she raises questions about sexism, societal responsibilities, and the mother’s role or contribution to family relationships. She makes facts work together--such as fatherhood being as important as motherhood--and takes financial, emotional, academic, and experiential considerations into account. Although the entire project is in her voice, she seems to see the scenes from different angles. She moves from such simple explanations as assigning blame or awarding forgiveness to an investigation of societal responsibilities. With only a few effectively positioned pictures and the purposefully repeated image of a man’s smiling face, she makes her audience feel her father’s temporary presence in her life.

Both of these projects convey the students’ ongoing thinking processes and the agility of their thinking, their adaptive expertise. In “The Happiness,” the student makes clear that she doesn’t think she knows everything about this poem. The early childhood student elaborates upon the path she took to arrive at the project as it is now, what she learned and what she is continuing to learn. We look for such a sense of process in the presentations as a sign that students have grasped the complex learning potential a poem or thorny early childhood issue may offer and that they are gaining complex understandings of poetry or early childhood education. This proved difficult for many other students to
communicate in their presentations. The implication then is for us to do all we can to teach students how to reflect on their project development, on the choices they make and the reasons for them, and on what they have learned.

Content (http://crossroads.georgetown.edu/vkp/dportfolio/content/). Adaptive expertise in our disciplines begins with the students’ ability to define the course content. We anticipate that students then will become conversant with a range of topics related to the course content. In these introductory community college courses, we hope students will gain understandings that enable them to analyze critically and apply their analyses to new ideas.

“Dreaming of the Stars” is an early childhood project that illustrates the student’s grasp of the meaning of her story and the topics she chose to research in relation to it. The logical links between her story and research make clear how advocacy for children and professional ethics relate to her memory of a science teacher who daily fell asleep in class. The student is serious about the research part of the assignment, cites her sources correctly, and integrates solid information about early childhood education into her well-told tale. The information from her research is in her own words, which demonstrates how completely she has mastered and integrated that content. The images emphasize or sometimes provide a counterbalance for her point. The humorous cartoons that illustrate snoring and massage connect to serious points that she elaborates well. She seems to understand that while the situation she recounts is funny, it also raises real issues for teachers that she will incorporate into her future practice.

“Tomorrow” is another example of a carefully researched presentation that integrates the student’s knowledge of history, political science, and poetry. The result is a digital poetry project that is simultaneously scholarly and full of feeling. The student makes careful choices, using only black and white photos and a consistent design throughout. She seems to grasp the power of simplicity and has no gratuitous design elements. The speech at the end, the way the pictures shift as the mood and tone of the poem shift, and the way the music fits tell the audience that the author of this presentation not only understands the poem but also can dig into it and build upon it. She demonstrates that she sees what poetry can do and its worth.

In both cases, the students went beyond what we anticipated and situated their projects in what they already knew. Knowledge they already had or were gaining from social science classes and from their life experiences seemed to guide their work on these projects. It strikes us that a student’s ability to step back and take a broad view of the chosen topic, to draw from a variety of sources, and to place the work of their project in a larger context contributes significantly to projects that demonstrate mastery of course content and adaptive expertise. If that is so, then it may be incumbent upon us to help students refer to what they know from other classes and from life outside of the college experience in order to master the specific content of our courses.

Commitment (http://crossroads.georgetown.edu/vkp/dportfolio/commitment/). We want students to feel so motivated by these assignments that they take ownership and join the conversations within and across disciplines, take pride in their work, and enjoy both the process and the product. We want them to feel the authority of their voices in criticizing, adapting, and adding to the course material. We want them to commit to and value the deep digging that these projects demand. In order to generate these feelings and this commitment, we both designed projects that worked through embodied and situated pedagogies.

In “My Math in Second Grade,” the student integrates thoughts from many sources communicating her interest in learning about her topic rather than just meeting the minimum requirements of the
assignment. A lot transpired behind the scenes to help her to assimilate what she read and connect it to other authors, to what she heard in interviews, and to her own experience. While she knew that she didn’t like her math teacher and that math was hard, the fact that other people have explained her experience is a powerful source of validation for her. Their ideas become part of her active vocabulary. Listening to her presentation, we notice that her voice narrating the research personalizes her story and her application of the research, and conveys a sense of her commitment to and ownership of the enterprise. When she says, “I want to concentrate more on how to understand what the children are thinking and how to create interesting material for children to learn,” she indicates to us that through the project, she reached a level of commitment not just to this project but to the ideas inherent in it.

“Written in Pencil” is a moving presentation. The student selected pictures thoughtfully and in a way that reflects his involvement with the project. He demonstrates his commitment in a variety of ways, making excellent use of the many opportunities multimedia affords to communicate what he is thinking and learning. He focuses on small points of the project that are indicative of his motivation. Every detail he uses counts—the negative of an image along with the original, altering the font sizes so that his design speaks along with the poem. These result in a coherence that parallels the unity of the poem. He transmits the emotional force that he feels without telling his audience what he is feeling. While the power of his presentation can sweep away his viewers, an analysis of his project reveals his meticulous care, indicative of his motivation, commitment, and ownership of the project.

In analyzing these and other projects that grow out of embodied and situated pedagogies, we see that we face a paradoxical challenge. Often, it seems, our extensive directions, which enable students to do the project, can limit students to what we ask of them and prevent them from going beyond that. Interest in the project is not the problem; we usually can generate students’ enthusiasm for the tricks and dazzle that technology offers. However, the students whose projects clearly demonstrate their commitment go far beyond playing with the technology to doing analytical work that they represent through technology. Perhaps we should give all students explicit encouragement to delve so deeply into this work, so that they make creative and analytical decisions that surprise us.

Reviewing our findings based on student work and using the framework of the four C’s, we see a theme of putting our intentions into words for the students in our classes. Working with one another to find the frame of the four C’s helped us to clarify those intentions such that we can now share them with our students.

Findings from our Collaboration

Our separate disciplinary approaches give us perspectives that inform one another. For example, from his vantage point as a writing teacher, Joe commented insightfully on the effect one early childhood student’s writing deficiencies might have had on her presentation and even on her exploration of the material. Our disciplinary perspectives also added to what we learned from and with each other. Cuban’s research with Stanford University faculty supports our claim of added value from professional development activity across disciplines. He found that interdisciplinary groups were more innovative. He suggests that while academic freedom can preclude telling someone in one’s own field how to teach, it is not a comparable issue when faculty members work with others from outside of their disciplines. That may have been the case for us, too.

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As we worked together, though, we realized that some differences in our approaches were independent of our disciplinary perspectives and simply had to do with personality. Our alternative ways of looking—both professional and personal—enable us to inform one another’s analysis of projects. For instance, looking at a digital poetry project, Joe commented on the big picture, “The student author found meaning in the poem and represented that meaning through her graphics but her graphic interpretation is not supported by the poem. Although she made good connections within individual slides of the presentation and lines of the poem, she missed the overall point of the poem, although she insists that she is getting the real point.”

Looking at the same project, Rachel zeroed in on a detail, “The student author, in her final statement, showed the commitment she felt as she argued for her choices—she knows she chose literal representations, but wouldn’t change a thing if she had it to do over. Actually, I think this indicates that she learned what Joe was teaching, but didn’t fully buy it, raising an important issue for us as teachers.” These opposing approaches led us to richer discussion and more challenging questions as Joe added, “She had the authority to make decisions about the right way to interpret poem, and I want to encourage students’ sense of authority; but although her sense of ownership was strong, it did not seem to lend itself to flexibility or reexamination. What does that mean about her growth and learning?”

We also believe that we, as outsiders to each other’s classroom, analyze each other’s students’ presentations differently from the classroom teacher who assigned the work, at least in part because as classroom teachers we construct our assignments and then take for granted when students do them as we expect them to. The collaborator, as an outsider who did not create the assignment, notices students’ achievements that the classroom teacher may overlook or take for granted. In one presentation, for example, Rachel took the way the student incorporated her interview/observation assignment into the presentation for granted, and Joe was able to see connections the student author made that were valuable to acknowledge. Sometimes, because the student isn’t doing what we expected or intended in the assignment, we can see their work as less successful than someone looking without those expectations who can see beyond the bounds of the assignment to what the student may have learned. Sometimes we know too much about our own students and what we know blinds us to elements of their work that the collaborator, who knows fewer details about the students’ lives, can see.

Although a point of interest in our collaboration is the difference in our disciplines, one of our findings is that our disciplines aren’t all that different. Both teacher education and literature are about being a person, about feeling and thinking and learning and growing and being human beings in the world. One parallel we found is that our work with students may have different start and end points, but strives to achieve similar goals through the process. The four C’s of Complexity, Connection, Content, and Commitment are a prime example. We also realized that while Rachel’s students’ projects originated from the personal (a story from childhood) and moved to the professional (educational or psychological theories), Joe’s students’ projects started with the professional or academic (a poem) and moved to the personal (their interpretations of it). In both cases, the journey involved bridging the personal with the disciplinary or professional/academic.

We began to wonder what makes it so difficult for some students to make the connections within their disciplinary work and across disciplines. Looking at students’ presentations, we realized that technology should make it easier to demonstrate connections between poetry and meaning and between personal experience and the early childhood professional literature. In fact, technology simply makes apparent in both our classes that some students do not make such connections. Looking at projects in both disciplines, we came to believe that if the connections are not there with the technology,
then they are really not there. We started to wonder together what this means about some students as college students and as future professionals and what we can do to help them. We’re able to ask these questions more authoritatively by virtue of asking them of one another.

Our discussions of the projects led us to other parallels that challenge our teaching. Early in the semester Joe’s class generates a list of favorite and least favorite books, and invariably several books appear on both lists. When Joe asks what that means, some students say, “It’s all opinion. Nobody can say which book is a good book.” Rachel hears the same thing in her class during discussions of the decisions teachers make in difficult situations. Should a child be punished for an infraction? Should teachers reward desired behavior with stickers? When students don’t agree with each other, they often echo Joe’s students, saying that everyone has the right to her own beliefs.

We share the goal of moving students beyond thinking “it’s all opinion” to thinking that there are sets of criteria that serious thinkers use to think critically about literature and about working with children. We found as we discussed this issue of students’ developing sets of professional and academic criteria that we also share a dilemma that we did not realize crossed disciplinary boundaries. What do we want to communicate about taste or professionalism, and what do we believe should be left up to students to decide for themselves?

Rachel wants students to learn about and consider what many teachers call professional attitudes and behaviors, even when some of those attitudes and behaviors go against the grain of the student’s common sense or personal knowledge. At the same time, Rachel wants students to address professional ideas critically, not just accepting them at face value.

Similarly, Joe wants students to think critically about literature, knowing what has critical acclaim while simultaneously being able to defend their own preferences. And, in the end, honestly, we both want students to accept what we regard as our considered professional values, at least to some degree, but we hope they will come to that acceptance on their own.

Confessing to this dilemma and the contradictions inherent in it—to ourselves and each other—helps us to look at it seriously. What for Joe concerns elitism, taste, and popular culture, for Rachel is a matter of respect for cultural differences and professionalism. As community college teachers our collaboration leads us to a larger issue of the academy or profession fitting into the community college student’s world and the community college student entering the academy or profession.

In Conclusion

Clearly we each found much could be learned from a colleague in another discipline. We felt educated by the differences between us and pleasantly surprised by the similarities. Our collaboration was fueled by the excitement of developing a digital gallery whose interesting elements guided and structured our work learning together about our teaching through the students’ work.

Most important, though, is our students’ learning—the purpose, after all, of our teaching. When we look at student learning across disciplines, do disciplinary barriers really blur? If so, it may be because

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### Notes

3 See Berta Vigil Laden, “Celebratory socialization of culturally diverse students through academic programs and support services,” in *Community Colleges as cultural texts: Qualitative explorations of organizational and student culture*, ed. Kathleen M. Shaw, James R. Valadez, and Robert A. Rhoads (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 173-194, for a discussion of community college students’ border crossings and border knowledge.
we are seeking evidence of active student engagement, relying on rigor as the outcome of a well-structured and interesting assignment in which students are fully involved, no matter in what discipline. We think the student authored presentations in our digital gallery that illustrate an understanding of complexity, meaningful connections, mastery of content, and commitment to the work, illustrate that embodied pedagogy, when it is also situated pedagogy, can result in real learning and adaptive expertise in English class or in an Introduction to Early Childhood Education.

When we began looking together we had no way to anticipate how much we would see about our students learning and how much we would learn ourselves. The process of collaboration in our scholarship of teaching and learning, and the process of working to present that collaboration in electronic form, let us look at the learning together, to the benefit of our teaching and our students’ learning.