**L. Computer Connection**

9:30 AM to 10:45 AM on Saturday, March 22, 2014 ~ Grand Ballroom Foyer, Third Floor

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**Badges, Blogs, and Google+: Clicking in an Online Learning Community**

Two things you should know about me – I am a social constructivist and I am a technology addict – but I only use my powers for good. This is my story.

I have been teaching online for more than a decade and for the past five years I have taught online almost exclusively – both undergraduate and graduate classes. During that time I have also been an online student (Texas Tech’s TCR PhD program), but long before both I had discovered the power of the internet to collaborate, communicate, and educate. I believe in the power of online education – especially for the teaching of writing. I don’t believe technology is THE answer just one of many possible, but I love that technology allows me to connect with others over space and time. I believe this offers rich opportunity for collaboration, inspiration, and connection, BUT technology can also hinder – or more difficulty – one very important element – creating a learning community.

**Community is essential for learning** (social constructivist, remember), but even more so for learning to write. All of my meaningful growth and development as a writer has taken place within a writing group and I always strive to replicate that sense of community in my writing classes. Writers do not develop in a vacuum and practicing and studying writing within a community of writers is essential. Writers need other writers to provide models, feedback, support, and inspiration. Of course, in the interest of full disclosure I should add that part of my job is directing Morehead’s National Writing Project site – and NWP work is all about learning communities – so I am not unbiased.

But **community doesn't just happen** when writers are in the same room and when they are separated by distance and time it becomes even more challenging to create community. But it can be done – I promise.

My three tools for creating and sustaining community are: badges, blogs, and Google+

I am very transparent with my students about why I believe community is so important and I reinforce that by making **community building an actual assignment**. For this assignment, students introduce themselves with six word memoirs and me museums (activities we use in my NWP site) but most important we create a back channel separate from the CMS in Google+. Students are encouraged to post regularly about things we might learn if we saw them in person (new hair color or boots? Feeling under the weather) and other news about their lives. Even more important they are encouraged to interact – not just share their news but respond to the posts of others. I have found they begin the participation because they must but most continue even after the assignment is over because they learn to value the interaction and support they find.

I do not grade this assignment – after all, how do you grade community interaction? – instead the **assignment is assessed using badges**. We created a set of badges and criteria as a class (think senior superlatives – such as Helping Hand, Tough Cookie, and Booster) and the students awarded the badges themselves. Most interesting to me is how the students respond to the badges. They take the awards very seriously – both awarding the badges and receiving them. I admit when I first began this process I was nervous about handing over the assessment and puts some checks and balances into place, but over the semesters I have been doing this I haven’t needed them. I am continually surprised by how much agreement I see. There is almost always a consensus about who deserves which badge and students accept the votes of their peers.

Of course a class cannot be simply about creating a community. We also need to engage in our purpose – whether it is developing as writers or exploring comic book themes -- and for this **I use a class blog**. I am a proponent of low stakes writing and so a class blog is a natural assignment for me, but in addition to the tremendous benefits of reflection and practice it fosters - I find blogging together (and participating on those blogs) is also about community and the social construction of knowledge. And I encourage that element even more through the use of badges. I start the conversation with a prompt intended to extend our conversation about the topics we explored through reading and in class that week. Students must post a response to that prompt and they must choose at least one blog post to post an extended comment. Full participation will only get you so far - to earn an A on this assignment you must foster discussion - and I am not the judge. I again use badges to grade this assignment. I have found the badges emphasize for my students that I am not their audience for their blog posts and as a result they take the assignment more seriously. They worry about attracting an audience and they spend more time crafting their posts as a result.

I have already mentioned how I use **Google+** for our community building assignment but it also offers some great tools for communication and collaboration. I regularly chat with my students - they tend to use the chat tool as office hours and it is great for conferencing about a project. My graduate students use it for writing workshop and really like that option. It is important that any community have a back channel for communication – especially informal connections – and a place to work. These are easy to come by in a traditional classroom but more challenging in an online one. Google+ offers both and I really like using it for our community.

That is a quick overview of how I use badges, blogs, and Google+ to create and sustain community in my online classes. For me, the proof is in the pudding. Students report to me at the end of the semester that they feel more connected with their online peers than those in face to face classes and that this connection has helped make this a great class experience.

Find more information and resources on my web page – deannamascle.com – look for the title of this session in the right sidebar.