Three Lessons:
Learning to Teach All Over Again

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When I was a graduate student in American Studies at Minnesota, the required methods course focused on teaching, not on research. I took this as a sure sign that I was entering the right field, since a desire to teach well was my main motivation for going into American Studies instead of English. When I first started teaching American literature, during an English MA program, I found myself constantly referring to history, and I quickly became aware of how little I knew. More knowledge of the history would make me a better teacher of literature, I reasoned. And my graduate courses in history, sociology, and art certainly helped fill in the background. But Lary May's graduate methods course was more practical. What I remember most from the course are three very concrete lessons about how to teach. First, and most important, teaching and learning are active processes. Make students do most of the talking, have them work directly with primary materials, ask them to develop presentations and solve problems. Get them involved, and put them at the center. Second, use several media; in 1986 that meant slides, audio tapes, and videos. Such materials would make the course more interesting, and using several kinds of texts was a hallmark of American Studies courses. In one session of the methods course, Ed Griffin, the chair of the American Studies program then, offered his idea for a "Minnesota method" for teaching which involved a series of units, each built around a text, an artifact, an event, and a place. Third, Larry warned us, teachers should be like boy scouts: prepared for anything. Know how all the a/v equipment works, and bring an extra light bulb in case the old one burns out halfway through class!

Those lessons resonate as I read these essays and think about my own American Studies teaching. American Studies is not unique in its emphasis on active learning or using diverse primary materials,

as these essays attest. While many of these authors teach in fields closely related to American Studies, almost none define themselves as American Studies teachers. Yet the courses they describe clearly embody the first two lessons of Lary's methods course, and this suggests that new media technologies have much to offer to American Studies faculty. The reverse may also be true: interdisciplinary teachers, I would argue, have much to add to the developing conversation among faculty about how to make good use of technology in the classroom.

All of the authors here begin with the premise that active, involved, hands-on learning is the most effective, because students understand concepts and materials by using them. Moreover, such activities offer experiential lessons in the production and communication of knowledge, the distribution of power in social groups, and the processes of culture-in-action. Students gain a sense of ownership of the material and an awareness of knowledge as something that is made, not given. In other words, active learning using new media technologies can help students become critical consumers and communicators of information. For me, the idea that students should not just learn information but should also learn ways to think critically about and make thoughtful use of information is a core of American Studies teaching.

The most obvious contribution of new media technologies to active learning, as these essays suggest, is through the incredible wealth of materials and tools available through the Internet. When I was a graduate student, the primary texts I could make available to my students were pretty limited—hard-to-read copies of nineteenth-century magazine pages, slides of works of art, a map I could post in the front of the room. Now the choices are overwhelming. From digitized versions of nineteenth-century magazines to photo collections, historic documents, and more, the range of primary materials that are readily available to students has expanded almost beyond imagining.

Not only does technology help make more material available, it also allows new ways of reading texts, such as searching a text for specific references or zooming in for detailed exploration of visual images. For students, this possibility is, at first, bewildering. In a recent exercise using an online zoom-able map of Youngstown, my students had to learn how to operate the zoom program, but they also had to figure out how zooming in on details might change the way they read the map. The technology made it possible for them to look at the map in a new way, and on some level, I think this experience helped them re-consider their assumptions about maps

and about reading texts. This self-consciousness about using materials is probably already fading for many of our students, since web-based media and all its bells and whistles are becoming so familiar, but for now new media technologies offer opportunities for us to critically discuss the act of observation. The meaning of "critical reading" expands.

Perhaps even more important, though, the process of adding new materials to the web, what Randy Bass calls "opening the archive," has occurred largely through the work of students in projects like the Virtual Greenbelt, the Jesuit Plantation, and the American Studies Museum web sites. Clearly, changes have occurred not only in access to materials but also in who is involved in making it accessible and interpreting it. As student-built online exhibits illustrate, the Internet and other electronic tools do not just enhance long-standing American Studies teaching practices like asking students to complete their own analyses of primary materials. They also offer students new ways to share their ideas and their work, thus inviting them to become more critical and more public communicators. Electronic publishing allows students to incorporate different kinds of materials into their own analyses (by including links to images, audio, and film texts within the standard written text). With different fonts, hypertext, and animated links, electronic publishing can also allow students to represent their analyses in more complicated ways than they could ever achieve with plain type on plain paper. The process of communicating is complicated when we invite students not simply to analyze the media but to practice making media. There is a significant difference between asking students to analyze a pop culture text, such as the cover of a women's magazine, and asking them to use their analysis to create their own magazine cover or an annotated, interactive critical reading of a cover.

New media technologies also facilitate interactive communication, as students read and respond to each other's work, listen in (and sometimes join) conversations among professionals in the field, talk with students on another campus, or receive email comments on their web sites from total strangers. Yet enhanced awareness of how their ideas are part of a public discourse can be achieved with a simple email list or chat room. As these essays suggest, having students see themselves and their work as part of a larger conversation has become a central course goal—a goal that we simply couldn't even imagine realistically without technology.

Perhaps the most important benefit of these new possibilities for American Studies faculty is that it necessitates self-inquiry and fac-

ulty learning. First, as Larry warned us about knowing how to use the a/v equipment, we have to learn to use the tools and to find our way through the vast, uncharted oceans of material on the web. But because technologies are always changing, both in content and form, this process of rethinking does not have a clear end. It is recursive and persistent. The instructional software your college used last year might easily be replaced over the summer, and new programs will keep replacing old ones. The web site that provided the perfect supplement to your course last fall will not be available next fall. In the world of new media technology, there is nothing comparable to the proverbial set of old yellowed class notes. Technology is, as Mary McGuire here notes, ephemeral, unstable, uncontrollable. And so rethinking has become an integral part of the system.

Nor does the process involve simply redesigning courses or finding the right material. Technology also invites us—some would even argue that it requires us—to question our work as teachers. The potential transformations are enticing. Technology facilitates "more active engagement" (Buckmire, Foreman, & Maeda). It encourages students to have a greater sense of audience in their writing (Walsh). It helps students "find their own voices" (Schweitzer). Technology de-centers the learning process, giving students a larger role in constructing course content, shifting the role of teachers from experts to facilitators. Yet, as McGuire and others caution, we must also be "self-conscious and self-critical about what we are doing." We must, in other words, become used to playing a dual role, as teacher and as researcher. The research part here is not one most faculty are used to. Rather, we have to become scholars of teaching. We must learn how to examine what happens to student learning and to the teacher's role when technology becomes an active participant in the classroom. The Intentional Media essays offer a useful model for such scholarship, since they remind us that the simple process of defining one's expectations, describing a course, and reflecting critically upon the course can yield helpful insights about how teaching is changing and how learning occurs. From such informed, critical reflection, self-awareness and re-vision can develop.

For American Studies faculty, the idea that reconsidering what we do is not just useful but also necessary represents a familiar pattern. Critical reflection on what American Studies is and how it should be done is a dominant mode in American Studies scholarship. Take a look at a bibliography of major articles in American Studies: many focus on re-examining the field, taking stock, trying

to define the field or, just as often, arguing that such a definition is impossible. Read Janice Radway's 1998 American Studies Association presidential address, in which she both acknowledges the boundary-crossing that the field has exemplified and reminds American Studies scholars of the implied boundaries many of us prefer to ignore. This habit of self-reflection and self-criticism began long ago. It has been exacerbated, I believe, since the 1970s, when Gene Wise suggested that we can read the history of American Studies as a series of paradigm shifts. Ever since, American Studies scholars have devoted considerable energy to trying to figure out what the next new paradigm will be. We never want to be caught in an old one. This is evidenced, in part, by the way American Studies has embraced new media technologies, since they are in themselves a new paradigm, and they reinforce our sense of knowledge as ever-changing. Thus, new media technologies fit well into the pedagogical values of American Studies, but they also fit well into the field's continuing paradigm that change motivated by self-examination should be a dominant practice in the field.

Such questioning is a central value in most interdisciplinary fields, in part because we have no clearly-defined, accepted set of methodologies or materials. Rather, interdisciplinary fields are always borrowing and revising research methods and theories. In order to borrow wisely and blend approaches effectively, scholars and teachers must be willing to question their own work constantly. Indeed, I'm struck by the similarity between interdisciplinary studies and the World Wide Web. Both are constructed with a rather amoebae-like body of data, and neither has neat boundaries or clear, stable structures. In order to participate in a field or practice that is ever-expanding, always-shifting, and often, apparently, disorganized, one must be curious and willing to experiment. To participate effectively in such a practice, one must be willing to stand back and evaluate the process, and the best practitioners of both technology-enhanced teaching and interdisciplinary scholarship are devoted self-questioners.

Another interesting connection between contemporary interdisciplinary studies and new media technologies emerges from these essays: a commitment to alternative political and social consciousness, especially in relation to gender, race, and class. This triumvirate has long held center stage in American Studies, and all have served as central organizing concepts for other interdisciplinary fields (Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, Working-Class Studies). Empowering pedagogy and increased political con-

sciousness are central values in these fields, and technology appears to offer a new set of tools for fulfilling these values. While we should be cautious about just how democratizing technology can be—a point Buckmire, Foreman, and Maeda highlight in their reference to "information barrios" and that Weis notes in warning that technology may work differently for different students—technology does appear to offer ways of expanding the perspectives available for discussion. As Mary McGuire points out, relying on the popular or scholarly press limits one's access to radical perspectives. Even with its limitations, the web may be more inclusive in terms of content than most textbooks or periodicals. And interactive technologies do seem to encourage students to 'speak' more, to become self-critical about their own positions (both social and political), and to read authority in more critical ways. As Weis puts it, technology helped to create a "dialectic tone" in her class. Further, because using technology changes the relationships between faculty and students, it may be a useful tool for re-constructing classroom and intellectual authority. It is not that faculty authority is erased—far from it. Technology can serve to highlight "the structural role of teachers" (Ewell) by making our role as formatters more obvious. Those who are committed to helping students recognize themselves as "potential agents of change" (Buckmire, Foreman, and Maeda) and changing "structures of power in the classroom and, perhaps, the world at large" (Schweitzer) would do well to consider both what technology can offer and where its limitations lie.

In the end, the stories told in these essays suggest that there's good reason to embrace new media technologies in interdisciplinary teaching. It is not simply that technology offers tools to help us incorporate Lary's three lessons into our teaching. In addition, technology can help us make our teaching a form of active, multimedia learning for ourselves. At my University—and I imagine that Youngstown State is not unique in this—faculty are being encouraged to integrate teaching and scholarship. If the use of technology invites us to be more critical of our own teaching and to constantly interrogate our work as teachers, then linking these two academic practices may become a more familiar, comfortable practice. That is good news for any discipline.