

Title III Grant Proposal: Fostering Collaborative Learning in ENGL-108, an Online Creative Writing Course

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1. Project Description

During Fall 2006, I taught ENGL-108, the first online creative writing course to be offered at Ohlone—and one of the first online creative writing courses at a community college, period. As with any new endeavor, there were successes and failures. On the whole, students valued the flexibility and freedom offered by the online format; in fact, many students said on a survey that they simply wouldn't have been able to take the class if it had been offered "live." Some of them appreciated the anonymity of cyberspace, especially when it came to submitting their writing to others.

However, students also said they missed the feeling of interaction and collaboration that a live class offered them. They didn't feel as connected to the other students as they wanted to, and they weren't able to work together and share ideas as they had done in traditional classes. As one student wrote in a survey, "I wish this class met in person. It's hard to feel a sense of community when you are home alone typing into a screen. In this class I missed talking with other students and hearing their opinions."

In particular, online discussion boards were a struggle. Some of the students did not participate, or their participation was lackluster; others participated too much and seemed to scare off less confident students. There were unexpected, shining moments, however, when students really did talk to each other and learn from each other, and I wish to build on these moments to create a more structured and collaborative use of the discussion boards.

My project is to revise my teaching of ENGL-108 to encourage student connection and collaboration. I wish to do three things: 1) rethink and revise the discussion board topics to encourage more discussion among the students; and 2) establish a system for students to offer each other feedback about their creative writing; and 3) develop a project that requires students to work collaboratively on a writing and/or research assignment.

2. Project Outcomes (Student Centered)

The SLOs for ENGL-108 are as follows:

Students will:

1. Examine the creative process and the key elements of the craft of writing fiction;
2. Apply these elements to your own writing;
3. Practice the craft of fiction by experimenting with several different techniques and forms of writing;
4. Analyze and discuss how selected examples of short fiction are crafted; and
5. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their own writing and the writing of others.

Greater collaboration among the students in ENGL-108 would help students in achieving the fourth and fifth SLOs. If students are engaged in a discussion of the short stories assigned, they will hear other's views and thus be able to conduct a deeper and more meaningful analysis of the stories' literary techniques. Also, students who are exchanging

feedback in a constructive way and helping each other with their writing will be able to sharpen their evaluative skills. The implementation of a group project for ENGL-108 would give students the opportunity to work together to meet a common goal.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, greater collaboration will likely help students with respect to *all* of the SLOs. Research has shown that students often prefer learning from each other rather than from the teacher or the textbook. And when it comes to creative endeavors, such as writing, many students find that collaboration is essential to the creative process. Writers benefit from the sense that they have an audience of readers who can provide practical help, motivation, moral support, and a feeling of shared struggle. This spirit of community is particularly important to combat the feelings of isolation and lack of motivation that sometimes occur in an online environment.

3. Assessment Strategies

I plan to assess the success of this project in two ways. First, I can determine whether students are working collaboratively through my own observations of the discussion board conversations. Are people talking with each other, or are they merely responding to a prompt? Are they communicating more with me than they are with the other students? Are they helping each other with problems and questions? Is the group project really the work of a group?

Second, I plan to initiate a survey at the end of the semester, asking students to gauge their level of collaboration with other students and what benefits they may have gained from that collaboration.

4. Project Implementation Timeline

A rough timeline for the project would be as follows:

July-August 2007: Create discussion board topics, collaborative project, and system for students to offer each other feedback. Begin uploading this information to WebCT.

September 2007-December 2007: Class begins at the end of August. Document level of collaboration on online discussion boards. Adjust topics/assignments as needed to suit the individual students.

December 2007: Survey students to determine their view of the level of collaboration in ENGL-108. Submit Title III report assessing the outcomes of the project.

5. Faculty Responsible for Development and Implementation

I, Jennifer Hurley, Assistant Professor of English, would be the sole faculty member responsible for developing and implementing this project.

6. Technology and Software Requirements

Access to WebCT.