

Title III Grant Proposal: Creating a (Mostly) Paperless Classroom for English 101C

Author: Jennifer Hurley

1. Project Description

Ever since I heard that Sheldon Helms had moved to a completely “paperless” classroom, I’ve felt a little guilty about my use (and frankly, abuse) of the copier. As I become more environmentally aware, I feel increasingly uncomfortable about the amount of paper exchanged in my classes each semester. However, it really possible for an English class, which depends so much upon the written word, to be paperless?

Part of my Xeroxing addiction is due to the fact that I typically create my own reading materials (in the form of large paper packets) as opposed to using standard textbooks. These packets typically contain newspaper/journal articles about an issue in the news. I like being able to engage with my students on current issues, and I know they appreciate reading about topics that have “real-world” relevance. Also, when we are discussing an issue that I feel has importance, I am more engaged and enthusiastic. I think that selecting my own reading materials has a direct relationship to my success in achieving SLOs. When I deal with current issues, I find that students demonstrate better reading comprehension, participate more actively in discussions, and actually write better (most likely because they are engaged about what they are writing about). I also have witnessed students making connections between my packets and newspaper articles/You-Tube videos they have found themselves.

The other aspect of my paper-heavy English classroom is ... well, writing. A writing class demands that students write a lot. Thus, written homework is required for every class session. Much of this written work is ungraded work, but nonetheless, it is still critical practice work. I keep this written homework in my office, and I am alarmed every semester by the tremendous stacks of paper I find myself recycling.

How can I preserve these positive aspects of my classroom (personalized readings and lots of student writing) and still go paperless? Also, how can I use the paperless classroom to create even more opportunities for student learning?

My goal for this project is to use technology to create a mostly paperless classroom for English 101C that preserves the positive aspects of my paper-heavy classroom and adds new possibilities for success in achieving SLOs. I wish to do two things: 1) find a student-friendly and teacher-friendly way to distribute readings and other resources electronically in English 101C; and 2) use this new electronic environment to improve success in achieving the SLOs for English 101C. If this project is a success, I hope to break my paper addiction for all of my classes in the near future.

2. Project Outcomes (Student Centered)

The SLOs for ENGL-101C are as follows:

Students will:

1. understand what critical thinking is;
2. apply critical thinking skills to images, problems, and college-level readings; and
3. utilize critical thinking skills to create formal written arguments.

This project will focus on the second SLO, the students' ability to apply critical thinking skills to readings, and the third SLO, the students' ability to use critical thinking skills in their writing.

I plan to use the upcoming presidential election as a focal point for English 101C in Fall 2008. Clearly, this topic requires using the most current materials available. The paperless classroom will allow me to send out new articles more quickly than if I had had to Xerox them. I can email students or post links to articles on WebCT. The availability of and easy access to the most up-to-date readings will certainly improve the quality of the discussions, which will have a direct impact on students' ability to apply critical thinking skills to readings (the second SLO).

My initial fear, of course, was that students would not print the necessary readings, and as a result, we would be unable to look closely at specific passages. Also, if students were planning to print out all of the articles, I worried that I would not be saving paper after all. But what if I required students to print out the article they liked the most and asked them to present their ideas on that article? This strategy might allow students to focus their attention on one specific article, rather than wading through a large stack of material and absorbing little of it. And what if I turned to technology as a way to examine passages from a reading? I could project the reading on the overhead screen and use the smart pen to mark important phrases.

As I began to envision my paperless classroom, I started to realize how many new paperless resources I could draw on. Some of the assignments I envision for Fall 2008 require asking students to listen to National Public Radio election coverage, subscribe to the *New York Times* daily email, and watch You-Tube videos of the presidential debates. Clearly, these are all ways to improve student engagement, which is linked to success in all SLOs.

Another aspect of the paperless classroom is a greater focus on student-centered learning. Instead of the instructor "owning" the choice of reading material, I plan to offer students some responsibility for selecting readings and posting relevant links. Students will have an opportunity to practice key critical thinking skills (SLO #2) by making decisions about what readings/links are appropriate for our discussion and why.

Furthermore, going paperless can mean greater opportunities for writing instruction. I realized that the problem of those ever-growing stacks of homework in my office could be resolved fairly easily. I could ask students to email me their homework, which would have the added benefit of allowing me to see how they'd done before starting class. I could also easily cut and paste excerpts of their homework to a Word file to display for the class as models or for critique. I could email an exemplary homework out to the entire class, or I could email out a thought-provoking passage and ask students to respond to it. Another option would be to have students post their homework to the WebCT discussion page. This would allow students to see their homework assignments as part of a dialogue. Students would have an opportunity to "discuss" an issue before class even began. I could ask students to exchange drafts of an essay with another student and give a formal critique. All of these options would improve student learning outcome #3, the students' ability to use critical thinking skills in their own writing, and also increase collaboration.

The problem with electronic homework, however, is that students cannot exchange and discuss their papers in class. How can I keep the printed paper to a minimum and yet still have students share and discuss their work face-to-face (as opposed to online)? This is a question I still have not solved, but the technological capabilities at Newark might allow for students to use school laptops to share their work in groups.

Another question remains: When is paper truly necessary? I like for students to have a paper syllabus that they can access at any moment, so I plan to print and Xerox the syllabus for them. When I am grading, I like to be able to write comments in the margins, so I think I will stick with old-fashioned paper for graded essays. Will I Xerox handouts? Perhaps I can experiment with putting these documents on WebCT for students to access. Perhaps some handouts might need to be distributed in class. I foresee a period of experimentation before I can resolve these issues.

3. Assessment Strategies

I plan to assess the success of this project in two ways. First, I can determine the success based on my own observations. There are pragmatic questions: Are students actually able to access the necessary class materials? Do they seem confused or frustrated? Are they printing the materials when I ask them to do so? Then there are the more theoretical questions: Are students demonstrating critical thinking skills with respect to the readings? Are the discussions fruitful? Are the students more engaged and taking more initiative? Are they demonstrating greater collaboration? Are they writing with more success?

Second, I plan to initiate a survey at the end of the semester, asking students whether they felt the paperless environment was a benefit to their learning. If so, how?

4. Project Implementation Timeline

A rough timeline for the project would be as follows:

June-August 2008: Establish WebCT shell for English 101C. Search online for articles and other materials to use for the class and figure out the best way to distribute them. Create assignments that utilize paperless resources. Find strategies to use electronic homework for writing instruction, and brainstorm ways to allow students to share and discuss their writing face-to-face. Make revisions to syllabus to reflect the changes I have made.

August 2008-November 2008: Class begins at the end of August. Put my plan for a paperless classroom into practice. Attend sessions to learn more about how to use the teaching technology at Newark. Document the ways in which the change to paperless has impacted student learning (see questions above).

December 2008: Survey students to determine their views on the paperless classroom. 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 and classrooms equipped with computers, online access, and projectors.