

Digital Technology Meets Second City: Instructor as Academic Paramedic?

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*Published in the Northwestern Graduate School Quarterly
Spring 2003*

This past quarter I co-taught “**Projects in Art and Technology: Multimedia Improvisation**” for Northwestern’s Center for Art and Technology. Students in this class (the first of its kind in the nation) collaborated to conceive, stage and present a digital comedic performance. In addition to hands-on work with computerized technologies, they used improvisational performance techniques developed by pioneering theatre educator Viola Spolin and various Second City artists.

To call teaching this course a challenge would be an understatement. I’d liken the job requirements for teaching “Multimedia Improvisation” to those of an academic paramedic: the ability to cope with a work environment in constant flux, wage daily combat with unwieldy equipment and foresee and respond to any emergency. I found I needed to develop a daily lesson plan that was concise and cohesive, yet flexible enough to address technical difficulties or breakdowns as they occurred. I also discovered that teaching with technology is just plain hard work. It requires physical vigor to set up and take down equipment for each class and ingenuity to solve equipment storage and transportation problems.

But the upside of my experience teaching this class far outweighed the problems. I found it exciting and deeply fulfilling to work collectively with my students to explore new pedagogical and disciplinary terrain. The course also enabled me to connect with, engage and stimulate students by using twenty-first-century tools. As future faculty members, we must become adept at using such technologies in our teaching, even if mastery requires additional time and training. We owe it to our students.

As one student commented when submitting his final class project, “Thank you guys so much for such an educational and experimental and fun and meaningful class. You’ve helped me ask what is the future of theater and helped me to see what it may be like.” Not bad for a ten-week journey!

For information about the teaching methods employed in “Multimedia Improvisation” see Web site . I also recommend taking advantage of Northwestern’s many resources providing information about and hands-on training using technology for teaching. The Searle Center for Teaching Excellence is a good place to begin. The Center hosts workshops, seminars, lecture series and a teaching assistant fellowship program designed to improve teaching skills and introduce participants to the demands of a contemporary classroom. Another good site is Digital Media Services (<http://www.library.northwestern.edu/dms/>). Provided collaboratively by University Library and Academic Technologies (<http://www.at.northwestern.edu>), this program provides instruction to graduate students in various media formats and assists with the digitization of video, slides, photos and music files.