

Expanding Learning Experiences with Virtual Guest Experts

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2/27/2017



Much of our work as educators consists of designing and delivering experiences in which students can develop their understanding and application of concepts and skills in our disciplines. Given that we have only 16 weeks with our students, we need various ways for deepening and expanding these formative experiences in our field. Visiting experts can be a wonderful way of developing expertise, and leveraging online tools like Skype and Zoom can open up powerful possibilities for new collaboration and conversation.

This expansion of learning experiences was the impetus for Dr. Carolina Rocha's integration of guest lecturers in her Seminar in Spanish American Literature and Cinema for upper-level learners at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. As a foreign-language instructor who understands that language skills and cultural awareness develop best through immersion, Rocha has been concerned for years about the financial constraints that prevent U.S. students from studying abroad. To expand students' encounters with Spanish-speaking faculty who also bring new perspectives on Spanish-speaking cultures, Rocha approached two out-of-state colleagues, Dr. Georgia Seminet (St. Edwards University in Texas) and Dr. Beatriz Urraca (Widener University in Pennsylvania), to swap lectures on topics relevant to their own current courses.

In doing so, Rocha's students were exposed to different accents to hone their ear, as well as different ways of analyzing film and literature. She noted that she thought one guest lecturer's assignment would be beyond students' comfort levels due to the film's darkness and topic of child exploitation, but that students reported that they "loved the film." In this way, guest experts can present new perspectives, expanding students' learning experiences in our courses and developing a wider understanding of our fields.

In addition to revealing new perspectives, my use of Skype for live interviews with our books' authors in a recent creative-writing course had two primary objectives: 1) to invite new writers into the discipline and 2) to deepen students' experience of the writing process through what I will call "vicarious expertise." The first goal was to shrink the distance between the students and the authors by pulling back the wizard's curtain between the exalted "author" and the ordinary person who did the everyday work of writing. The second purpose was to provide students with an

opportunity to vicariously experience the writing process at the level of an expert. This is a chance for students to hear about the tug of an initial half-formed question, the details and patterns the expert noticed, and the snags in their process that led to new questions and sometimes became the best part of the finished work. Through these conversations, students also learn that true experts are always learning.

To warm students to the idea of unknowing and risk-taking as generative and essential for writing and learning, I often begin courses with a quote from geographer Yi Fu Tuan's *Space and Place* (1977):

Experience is the overcoming of perils. The word 'experience' shares a common root (per) with 'experiment,' 'expert' and 'perilous.' To experience in the active sense requires that one venture forth into the unfamiliar and experiment with the elusive and uncertain. To become an expert one must dare confront the perils of the new (p. 9).

This stance of unknowing may be easier to cultivate in writing courses, given how we regularly face the blank page, but, as we know, open questions and experiments are central to all disciplines. The question is how to engage students in this kind of messy learning, despite their fear of lower grades and other perceived failures. A guest expert—whether it's an author of an interesting book or research study, a designer of an engineering innovation, or a leader of a community project—not only can encourage students to delve into their own messy processes of inquiry, but can also provide a glimpse into what it is like to think creatively in the discipline.

Dunphy & Williamson (2004) point out that this creativity would escape non-experts who are still finding their way into the field, noting that

as declarative ["knowing what"] and procedural ["knowing how"] knowledge in the expert are automated to a large extent, there is additional cognitive space available to consider alternatives and reflect upon progress. Thus, an expert is better able to consider more possibilities (p. 108).

This expert capacity for creativity can be introduced to students through interviews with guests. The chance to hear an expert's process of taking risks and seeing alternatives expands students' sense of what can be done through the discipline. This approach to the discipline as a creative tool can be a leap for novices, an exhilarating one that can inspire introductory students and graduate students alike.

Tips for implementing

Skype and Zoom are both great choices for hosting virtual guest speakers. Fear not technology. Just do some test runs, perhaps with consultation from your tech-support staff.

An interview format can be helpful. For one, it requires little preparation time for your guest. This format also keeps the conversation grounded in student's questions and learning, and it keeps the tone more informal, which is engaging for students.

Be sure that the expert's visit is integrated in the course material, and prepare students beforehand by discussing how their visit contributes to current concerns in the course. Consider when to invite the guest(s)—perhaps early in the semester to spark engagement and confidence, or later, as students grow more fluent in the discipline.

Prepare students beforehand by having them develop questions based on the work of the expert. Have them then reflect on the guest's insights following the visit. For instance, Carolina Rocha included a reflective assignment of writing thank-you notes to the guest, which required students to describe something specific that they learned from the visit.

Finally, have a Plan B in the event technology fails and you are unable to interact with your guest speaker. One easy backup plan is to share the questions the students wrote for the interview, then zero in on one of the questions to brainstorm/problem solve using the expert's book/research question/innovation as a jumping-off point.

References:

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