The Better Alamance Project
New technologies and writing as citizenship

International Writing Across the Curriculum Conference
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http://www.betteralamance.org

Derek Lackaff @lackaff
William Moner @williamj
Glenn Scott @gwscott
Dianne Finch
Elon University
School of Communications

Paul Anderson
Elon University
Writing Excellence Initiative
Session goals

- Describe how we are facilitating student writing and civic engagement across classes
- Demonstrate technologies
- Suggest design strategies
- Facilitate discussion
Overview

Background and Context
Better Alamance: Wiki
Better Alamance: Stories
Better Alamance Project

- Technologies for community
- Inspired by Iceland: “Agile” projects: fast, iterative
- Core group of interdisciplinary organizers
- Students participate via class assignments, several then rotate into leadership roles
Alamance County, North Carolina

Small cities and towns
Deindustrialized
Sense of history
Immigration tensions
Elon University
Student Population

By State:
North Carolina: 17%
Massachusetts: 12%
New Jersey: 9%
Virginia: 7%
Maryland: 7%
Pennsylvania: 7%
New York: 7%
Connecticut: 6%

By Race:
Caucasian: 83%
African American: 6%
Hispanic: 6%
Multiracial: 3%
Asian: 2%
Writing to learn: to use writing to understand new content and perspectives, analyze information and problems, and generate knowledge.

Writing in a discipline: to develop and communicate ideas effectively to readers, for purposes and in contexts that are appropriate for his or her field of study.

Writing as a citizen: to communicate effectively with other members of his or her communities on issues of local, regional, or global significance.
Better Alamance: Wiki

LocalWiki platform
8 classes (25-33 students), ~400 articles

Objectives
Writing for civic understanding
Understanding digital collaboration / writing
Wiki Assignment Templates

- Short or long research article
  - Wikitext, photo(s), map, tags
- Article upgrade
  - Refine and develop existing article
- “Meta” article
  - Synthesize and organize existing content

Peer editing and collaboration
Better Alamance: Stories

Initiated in Fall 2013
Piloted through 2013-14 Academic Year

Purpose

Journalistic and long-form storytelling
Data-driven journalism
Interactive media and digital storytelling
Better Alamance: Stories

“Tension Grows After the Closing of Local Food Pantry”

Written for Dianne Finch’s journalism course

Impetus for further topic-driven storytelling

What forms of storytelling work best online in a local context?
Poverty in Alamance County

http://stories.betteralamance.org

Interactive Media M.A. Capstone Project
Formal experiment in scrollitelling or immersive experience
Synthesis of stories from undergraduate coursework
Contributions by course

Writing: Reporting for the Public Good (UG)
Photography: Digital Media Convergence (UG)
Data: Data Visualization (MA) & undergraduate work
Web Design: Interactive Media Capstone
Reporting for the Public Good

- Writing course for journalism majors.
- 18 students.
- Learn various forms - straight news to commentary.
  - Yes! Genres and audiences.
- Collaboration percolated in campus coffee shop.
  - Third place/third space.
Special Visit: Novelist Jill McCorkle
Challenge: Write profiles

- Find volunteers, recipients, donors, providers.
- Capture sense of community.
- Transfer Jill’s points about characterization to non-fiction.
- Agree on similar approaches for consistency.

All while working closely with Arielle.
Student Reflections

“It was very beneficial to be able to work and be in direct contact with Arielle. She knew exactly what she wanted from us, and she was easily reachable. The assignment very well could have improved my writing; it was certainly different than anything we had done in the class until that point. I’m a lover of human interest stories, so this was my favorite story to write. I was able to create a character using Jill McCorkle's tips, so it was a good exercise.”

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“Working with Arielle sharpened my writing and made me focus on the details more so than I ever have.”
Other Projects

Bilingual health care communication resource for Latinos in Alamance County

http://student.elon.edu/sjasper/

Undergraduate writing for the web (Prof. Finch)