Professors Publish Teaching Portfolios Online

BY JEFFREY R. YOUNG

IN AN EFFORT to analyze and improve their teaching, some professors are creating multimedia portfolios that try to capture the complex interactions that occur in the classroom.

A collection of such portfolios can be found in the new Knowledge Media Laboratory, a virtual resource center created by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Each year, the foundation selects about 40 professors from around the country who are given release time and resources to think about and hone their teaching skills. The online laboratory gives those professors a place to publish their work, and the foundation hopes that their portfolios will inspire others to review their own teaching (http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/KML/index.htm).

A FALSE ASSUMPTION

"The problem is that we often make the assumption that we already know how to teach," says Toru Iiyoshi, a senior scholar for the foundation and co-director of the Knowledge Media Laboratory. "Teaching, like research, is an extremely important and complex activity."

"We have been making our research public, but when it comes to teaching, we are practically mute," he adds. "Using technology is one of the most promising techniques to make people realize how much more we can learn about our teaching."

So far, the laboratory's gallery includes nine multimedia portfolios. These feature video clips of classroom interactions, audio clips of commentary by professors, syllabi and other teaching materials, examples of student assignments, and textual descriptions of what worked and what didn't.

TEACHING WITH TECHNOLOGY

Many of the portfolios focus on the use of technology in the classroom. One such example is by T. Mills Kelly, an assistant professor of history at George Mason University. Mr. Kelly created a portfolio for a survey course he taught on Western civilization while at Texas Tech University. In a recent semester, the professor taught one section in which he assigned only online reading materials and another section in which he assigned the same materials in printed form.

Mr. Kelly writes that the students who used online materials were more likely to reread materials than the students who were given printed readings. Three-fourths of the students who used online materials said they reread materials during the course of the semester, for instance, while only one in four of those who used printed readings reported returning to the readings (http://www2.tltc.ttu.edu/kelly/Pew/Portfolio/welcome.htm).

EVALUATING THE EVIDENCE

Such rereading is particularly important in studying history, says Mr. Kelly. "Good historians return to the same pieces of evidence over and over again, considering many possible meanings of their sources before finally committing themselves to one interpretation," Mr. Kelly writes.

Other professors featured on the site focus on their traditional classroom teaching.

In his portfolio, Bill Cerbin, a professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin at La Crosse, includes his thoughts and observations on what students in his class learn compared with what he intends to teach them.

"I tend to think that most teachers do pay attention to student learning and puzzle over it—why it is that students learn some things and don't learn others," he says in an "audio reflection" about a course he taught on education theory. "I discovered in really analyzing student responses to assignments that there was really a continuing gap between what I expected and hoped students would learn and what they were actually producing for me." ∎