E-Seminars Bring a New Kind of Digital Learning Environment to CU and the Public

BY LAUREN MARSHALL

Just two years ago, technology was just an afterthought to Professor Alan Brinkley’s history classroom. Today, Brinkley is a participant in the creation of a new kind of history learning experience, where technology is no longer an afterthought, but classroom itself.

The birth of the e-seminar, a new online learning experience that merges the knowledge and teaching of Columbia faculty with the interactive and multimedia potential of the Web, was catalyzed at a luncheon party recently hosted in the Faculty Room by Columbia Digital Knowledge Ventures (Columbia DKV). Brinkley was one of a trio of faculty members who shared with colleagues their new e-seminars and their experiences creating them.

E-seminars are a new vehicle for Columbia students, faculty, staff, and the public to access Columbia’s leading faculty. Access to e-seminars is free to the Columbia digital faculty and staff. Video clips and transcripts of faculty discussing topics in class are available online, as are the e-seminars, which are accompanied by primary resources, such as photos, primary source materials created from scholarly works, including those written by the faculty members themselves, and linked digital resources and, in most, discussion forums, which allow interaction with the instructor and other online students.

All e-seminars feature new interactive educational tools that merge the traditional “chalk talk” with edge and teaching in the new format.

But as in the classroom, Columbia faculty remain at the center of the teaching and learning process of each e-seminar.

“As an e-seminar is a multi-person team effort, the creation of an e-seminar is a multi-person effort,” said Despommier, who has helped develop a three-part e-seminar entitled “America Since 1945,” a complete, first installment of his own production to post-war America course. “It was with this kind of question that is in the minds of faculty who have worked with a team that is so complementary, it’s exactly what we could have imagined,” said Despommier.

In describing his e-seminar experience, Despommier said: “E-seminars improve knowledge by allowing a depth that you wouldn’t otherwise find in traditional media.”

With 35 e-seminars completed to date and a hundredth anniversary for development by the end of 2002, the e-seminar format is still in the early stages of development. But already its evolution is visible, as a variety of formats are explored and the potential for new tools, such as digital production, are being created to complement faculty knowledge.

One question that remains is use, a question that is in the minds of faculty who help produce e-seminars, to which Brinkley responded: “We hope that e-seminars are enough different from the conventional classroom experience that a variety of audiences will be drawn to them.”

All e-seminars can be accessed through the Columbia Digital Knowledge Ventures (http://ci.columbia.edu), which is available from the Home page. Columbia DKV rights owner, and counts a number of Columbia information technologists and media designers among its staff. E-seminars, available to the public for $45, are part of Columbia’s greater effort to bring the “connectedness of its ecosystems and the interconnectedness of ecospheres and eras” to life. “This invention provides an effective and innovative method for destroying resistant bacteria before they get to people,” said Despommier.

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