

Newell Innovative Teaching Award Application

COMUnion: Fostering Collaboration and Creativity in Interactive Media

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COMUnion: Fostering Collaboration and Creativity in Interactive Media

COMUnion represents a significant collaborative effort between the students and coursework in four courses: Interactive Media, Digital Storytelling, Principles of Public Relations, and Social Media Theory & Strategies. The finished product is www.unioncommarts.com, a departmental web presence for the Communication Arts department at Union University. Each class worked closely with the others classes to contribute a significant element to the overall project, experiencing the same professional collaborative environment they will encounter in the workplace.

The Interactive Media course has used project-based learning in previous semesters, focusing on interactive project design and management, but never at the scope of the **COMUnion** project. This project allowed the students not only to have real-life experiences with a client, the faculty of the Communication Arts department, but also to serve as a client by sub-contracting key elements of their project to other classes. This broadened their understanding of client relations as well as the scope of what they could achieve in a single semester.

Description of the project

The online presence for the Communication Arts department at Union University serves two main purposes: (1) to provide useful information to prospective students and parents for recruitment purposes and (2) to serve as a resource for current students and alumni, providing information about upcoming events, available tools and resources, and job/internship possibilities. The Communication Arts online presence was outdated in both content and style. The Interactive Media class was challenged with developing

an online presence that reflected new developments in design and technology, while minimizing the amount of time and resources needed to sustain the site.

The **Interactive Media** students were responsible for the overall design and content of the COMUnion website. The class was divided into three groups, each presenting a proposal for an updated website to faculty members in the department. The faculty selected the proposal that best suited the needs and goals of the department. In addition, the Interactive Media students served as project managers, coordinating the projects from the other classes.

The **Social Media Theory & Strategies** students were responsible for developing a social media integration plan for the department. They met with both members of the Communication Arts faculty and members of the Interactive Media class before developing their plans. The class was divided into six different groups, each presenting their social media integration plan to the Interactive Media class, who selected the plan that best enhanced their own project.

The **Digital Storytelling** students were responsible for producing promotional videos for each major and/or minor in the department, for use on the COMUnion website, as well as other avenues. Each group was given a faculty contact person for the major or minor, and a contact person in the Interactive Media class. The Interactive Media class worked closely with the Digital Storytelling students to maintain consistency among the various videos in both style and content.

The **Principles of Public Relations** students were responsible for conducting beta testing for the COMUnion website before the site went live to the public. After studying market research in their class, the students were able to develop their research

skills through a series of surveys and focus groups with groups of freshmen and sophomores. The results of their beta testing was compiled into a report and presented to the Interactive Media class, who used the findings to make improvements to the website.

How the project differs from current teaching ideas & methods in the field

Many Interactive Media classes work on a simple website or interactive project as the framework of their course content. It is also common for Interactive Media classes to work on a project for an outside client, building experience in client relations. The significant difference with this project and the current teaching methods in the field is two-fold:

1. While many Interactive Media classes work on projects for external clients, the project is most often designed and developed exclusively by the Interactive Media class. The structure of the COMUnion project allowed the Interactive Media class to not only experience working for a client, but also being the client, as they sub-contracted out key pieces of the project to other classes. This mirrors the experiences they will encounter in their careers working at interactive design firms.
2. The size and scope of this project would have been too great for a single class of 15 students to complete in a single semester. Mirroring the realities of the workplace, when a project is too large to tackle with existing resources firms often outsource pieces of the project to facilitate completion within the given deadline. Additionally, this allowed the Interactive Media class to focus on the

elements covered in class, while outsourcing the elements where others had greater expertise or theoretical grounding.

The COMUnion project also allowed for improved educational experiences for the other classes involved in the project. Previous sections of Digital Storytelling had produced short, interview-driven video packages, but not anywhere near the level of professionalism the COMUnion packages. The Digital Storytelling students were able to benefit from the experience of the Interactive Media class, who had all completed Digital Storytelling as a pre-requisite for the course. The Principles of Public Relations students were given a real-world product to test, which is normally outside of the scope of their principles class, and the Social Media class was able to see their social media plans assessed and implemented, giving them valuable feedback to their theory and strategy.

Your opinion of the success of the project and how it can be improved.

COMUnion was a significant addition to all the classes involved. The website and social media presence was launched by the end of the semester and is now the official departmental online presence for the Communication Arts department. Most of the videos produced by the Digital Storytelling classes have been integrated into the site and our departmental YouTube channel, which was one of the recommendations made by the Social Media class in their social media integration plan, along with a Facebook page (which was already in place), a Twitter account and a Flickr channel for pictures.

The greatest challenge faced throughout this project was coordinating the content in four separate classes to facilitate the completion of key elements on a

deadline. For example, the Interactive Media class had to have a completed and approved proposal to give to the Social Media class before they could begin their work developing a social media integration plan. Deadlines were pushed back throughout the semester to allow classes enough time to finish their pieces of the project in time for them to be implemented into the site. Greater coordination between the classes is needed to streamline the process. We have discussed scheduling the classes simultaneously and/or back to back to help facilitate meetings between the different classes.