



**Motivate, Engage, and Empower Students in a General Education
Course through Digital-Collaborative Learning**

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Abstract

Along with the rationale underlying the course, this article presents the evolving digital collaborative practices in IAH209 Horror Cinema, a hybrid general education course offered through the Center for Integrative Studies in the Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University. The course has changed after more than a decade of development and revision, from a fairly traditional, teacher-centered format with limited student-student interaction to one that is student and teamwork-centered through weekly teacher-student and student-student collaboration. Various digital and cloud-based tools have become central to course activities. That gradual and ongoing shift increasingly facilitates deeper student learning about the specific horror films that comprise the course and how viewers might understand the genre as a possible reflection of social issues regarding privilege, inequity, oppression, and justice. The approach paves the way for students to use popular entertainment to access and reflect on real-world situations and consider how we might better address those same concerns by concluding their work in the course. Equally significant, a digital collaborative approach to teaching and learning, like the methodology described for IAH209 Horror Cinema, enables learners to cultivate many next-generation competencies directly transferable to professional careers in the 21st century. The fusion of digital and collaborative skills practiced in IAH209 Horror Cinema thus equips learners for a more seamless transition to the professional world and a longer working life after graduation.

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the merits of a digital-collaborative course and the benefits it offers to 21st-century college and university students. Through my retrospective, I describe a general education film course, IAH209 Horror Cinema, from its early, teacher-centered inception to its evolution to a more student-centered, active learning entity. This shift, underway well before COVID-19, accelerated during 2020-2022, with the course becoming increasingly digital and collaborative. The current hybrid version has students and instructors meeting once per week with permanent student learning teams expected to complete much of their related work outside of physical meetings, preserving many of the same innovations implemented during the height of the global pandemic. From a theoretical foundation of the course, I further explain how it is set up within the online learning management system in use at Michigan State University.

I next present course expectations and related details for both weekly team activities and three related collaborative projects, all of which feature the use of digital and cloud-based tools for student learning teams to communicate, examine, discuss, create, and present their thinking, ideas, and realizations--that is to say “knowledge”—about course materials and connections to the real world. A later section details the role played in IAH209 Horror Cinema by routine independent metacognition and social metacognition, wherein individual students and fellow team members reflect on their learning each week, their independent and collaborative approach to the course, and consider concrete steps they might take moving forward to streamline and improve outcomes. The article closes with a self-critique in which I re-evaluate current practices and consider next steps to improve the course further, along with my overall approach to teaching and learning.

While IAH209 Horror Cinema is not necessarily in its final form, reexamining the course nevertheless leads me to the following related conclusion(s): 1) a digital-collaborative methodology can engage students more effectively than traditional teacher-centered delivery methods. 2) A digital-collaborative approach empowers students in a way that traditional pedagogy does not. Indeed, students can play a much more active role in their learning with considerable voice and choice. 3) A digital-collaborative approach can impart, albeit implicitly, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) principles as students from different backgrounds come together to navigate a democratized learning process through close collaboration. This final point, in particular, is vital within our increasingly interconnected, globalized, and digital world to enable greater cohesion and intercultural understanding than we have managed up to this point. 4) Finally, with the three preceding ideas, digital-collaborative learning has considerable transformative potential.

“It’s Alive! It’s Alive!”

When first hoisted through the metaphoric laboratory ceiling during an electrical storm above a remote castle in the Bavarian Alps, my nascent course on cinematic vampires, zombies, werewolves, and demonic children began life in the early 2000s as a 15-seat, first-year writing

seminar taught at a small liberal arts university in Central Illinois in the American Midwest. The course was presented initially as a retrospective that examined the function and appeal of the horror genre by surveying key films like *Let the Right One In* (Alfredson, 2008), *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (Branagh, 1994), *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968), *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974). At the same time, students examined these films from a socio-historical context as reflections of social fears and anxieties when the movies first appeared in theaters. The course convened twice weekly, and while pair or small group discussions were regular features of many class meetings, the course was still largely instructor-centered with traditional writing assignments (10+ brief, individually written "ticket out" reflections collected at the end of classes and two longer papers). Through three work sessions in one of the library computer labs, a librarian provided information on the fundamentals of research along with ongoing support to students in the gateway course.

Now taught every spring semester through the Center for Integrative Studies in the Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University, the current version of the course has grown into a larger and rather different creature that treats horror films as political statements and social critiques. Designated IAH209 Horror Cinema, the 15-week, 50-seat course is a 25%-75% hybrid with one physical meeting per week that lasts 50 minutes. The course syllabus and related documents from Week 3 and beyond expect students to carry out the rest of their coursework autonomously outside of the Monday morning meetings. Content and delivery have been reconfigured since the course's earlier years to become more student-centered, designed around digital-collaborative learning, and supported by various elements from other pedagogical approaches such as inquiry-based, project-based, and problem-based learning. IAH209 Horror Cinema fosters learning through empowerment and routine collaborative activities that learning teams organize using digital and cloud-based tools to communicate, collaborate, create, and share their work. From Week Three, first- through fourth-year undergraduates work together to examine course materials regarding race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and identity, relating these main points to systems of power, privilege, inequity, oppression, and justice. Students simultaneously cultivate real-world skills through collaboration, in which they take charge of their learning. They utilize various online tools to examine course materials, create new meaning, and share that knowledge. While some of the work completed by students in IAH209 Horror Cinema is independent, the vast majority of activities in the course are team-based.

In his article "Motivating Students to Engage in Learning: The MUSIC Model of Academic Motivation" (2009), Brett D. Jones notes that there must be a clear connection between course materials and classroom activities on the one hand and real-world relevance on the other to motivate students more effectively, a point of particular importance in the context of general education core courses. A digital collaborative approach to teaching and learning helps bridge that gap in two ways. First, the practice engages 21st-century undergraduates in a way that more traditional, teacher-centered methods do not. For the digital generation, a cohort that has grown up fully immersed in the virtual world, the use of digital and cloud-based tools of various kinds to augment their learning makes sense. They are comfortable with and respond well to technology. Second, and with Jones' second point about "usefulness" more firmly in mind, a digital collaborative approach allows students to acquire and cultivate real-world skills directly relevant to their working lives after graduation. Routine collaboration as part of a small permanent learning team provides students with many opportunities to acquire and hone the skills most sought by

21st-century employers, for example, inclusive collaboration, critical thinking, project planning and time management, organization, problem-solving, conflict resolution, follow through, ownership, and accountability (Dede & Richards, 2020).

More specifically, to IAH209 Horror Cinema, student agency and choice are crucial in weekly team analysis and discussion meetings, the resulting 'low risk' independent assignments, and three larger collaborative projects. Throughout, teams of four or five students are tasked with reflecting on personal and team decisions, work habits, related processes, how they might modify their approach moving forward, and how these points relate directly to their learning in the course. Either the specific materials they examine each week and the three collaborative projects they create, or the related choices, work habits, and processes behind such work. That same metacognition culminates in an independent course capstone project, a semester reflection in which individual students examine both their learning in relation to specific course materials as well as their team interactions during the 15-week semester. Through the completion of activities like these, and in addition to considering horror cinema in terms of real-life social issues, students are provided with ample opportunity to cultivate various 21st century skills. As Christopher J. Dede and John Richards (2020) suggest in their book *The 60-Year Curriculum: New Models for Lifelong Learning in the Digital Economy*, these next generation competencies will continue to serve learners throughout their working lives, long after they have forgotten the details of a particular college or university course. Rapid and ongoing social and economic change, brought on by increasing human lifespans, the ongoing march of technological innovation, and the rise of artificial intelligence, Dede and Richards point out, has already led to the continual need for workers to pivot, retrain, and change careers often as we careen ever further into the 21st century.

The Theoretical Underpinnings of IAH209 Horror Cinema

Viewed separately, the practices of digital and collaborative learning take many different forms. However, the fusion of both approaches within IAH209 Horror Cinema offers considerable potential for teaching and learning. Digital learning relies upon the use of various technologies to facilitate and enhance their learning by enabling students to interact with each other, access, research, create, and submit assignments, carry out assessments, and complete their coursework more effectively (De Porras et al., 2021; Vovides, 2018). Digital and cloud-based tools further provide an array of learning opportunities and creative possibilities (Selfa-Sastre et al., 2022). The practice has considerable potential to engage and empower students more effectively than traditional avenues of teaching, promoting greater equity, increasing student ownership, and accountability in the process (Spencer, 2020). Most notably digital learning helps impart real world skills to students that will have direct application to their working lives following graduation (Miller, 2015), calling to mind Jones' previous point about real world application (2009).

By virtue of collaborative learning, students become more able to seek, find, and explore connections between their respective ideas through close interaction with their teammates (Kalmar et al., 2022), a phenomenon I term intellectual cross-pollination. Learning becomes a social activity through teamwork (Vygotsky, 1978), as students take charge of their own learning (Ellis, 2001), and share the workload (Barkley, et al., 2014). Regardless of precise modality, the "classroom" is decentered and instructors coach student teams through their examination of course material when a collaborative approach to learning is introduced (Smith & Macgregor,

1992), a distinct move away from the traditional sage on the stage (Allen, 2016). Through close work with their peers, learning becomes “high impact” as students work with fellow team members, who bring different backgrounds, experiences, knowledge, and perspectives (Kuh & Schneider, 2008), to what I call the metaphoric collaborative table. By means of routine teamwork, participants refine their comprehension of course concepts through ongoing discussion and revision of ideas, refining their critical thinking skills in the process (Kuwabara et al., 2020). Team interactions like these empower students, placing them in the role of knowledge creators based on their own understanding of course materials rather than rely on the instructor’s interpretation (Barkley et al., 2014). When carried out effectively, collaborative learning is mutually supportive with every member having a voice in team decisions and providing assistance to each other throughout the collaborative process (Allen, 2016; Smith, 1996). More active than a traditional teacher-centered approach (Gopinathan et al., 2020), collaborative learning is not without challenges however (Loh & Ang, 2020). Yet at the same time, a further benefit of the activity is that it bolsters personal grit, increasing the likelihood that learners will buckle down and work through any unforeseen challenges related to their team activities (Dweck et al., 2014).

When the digital and collaborative approaches are merged, considerable teaching and learning opportunities become available to instructors and their students (Miller, 2020). Significantly, the combination of the two methodologies introduces new possibilities based on collective student exploration and interaction (Asari & Khan, 2020). This digital-collaborative approach, moreover, has the potential to motivate, engage, and empower 21st century students in new and exciting ways (Jeong, 2019), while simultaneously supporting and enhancing their learning whether they are located on campus, off campus, or shuttling between the two (Jaldemark et al., 2018). This pedagogic cyborg provides an effective means for more efficient, creative, and even innovative learning experiences for students, regardless of subject matter or the precise modality an instructor might use to deliver a course (Chounta, 2022). Moreover, a digital-collaborative approach to teaching and learning better enables students to practice vital competencies like intellectual agility, team building, follow through, accountability, problem-solving, and conflict resolution, which, Dede and Richards argue (2020), are vital to professional longevity and continued participation in our rapidly evolving globalized digital economy. As human life spans increase, with technology and artificial intelligence at the same time altering the career landscape at an increasingly rapid pace, they suggest, it has become imperative that students have ample opportunity to acquire, cultivate, and refine these next generation skills through routine digital-collaborative endeavors ahead of graduation. Doing so better prepares students to remain active players with greater agency on the career scene long after their student years conclude. These points inform how I have gradually recast IAH209 Horror Cinema since its debut more than a decade ago, especially in light of the more recent disruptions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. A closer look now at the design, activities, assignments, and projects that are part of the course will, I hope, clarify the form digital-collaborative learning takes currently in the course.

The Digital: Course Layout within the Online Learning Management System

Before moving on to a discussion of digitally enhanced collaboration within IAH209 Horror Cinema, it is wise to say a few words about the set-up of the online course pages. Delivery of all

content, with the exception of the films used for the course, occurs through the learning management systems currently in use at Michigan State University, Desire to Learn (D2L). The course was initially reconfigured and refined during Summer 2020 in response to Covid-19 and taught asynchronously during Spring 2021 and Spring 2022. More recently, a hybrid version of course was taught for the first time in Spring 2023. In each instance, clarifications were made to both online content, independent assignments, and larger collaborative project prompts to ease student understanding and head off potential stumbling blocks (Hussein, 2021).

While D2L enables instructors to do all kinds of interesting, complex, and even automated things in support of their teaching and learning goals, for IAH209 Horror Cinema, four course pages, in particular, are central to student activities. First, the homepage functions as a virtual gateway to the course. Here, students can read announcements posted at the start of each of the 15 weeks, to orient and focus their attention on the materials and related tasks they will carry out. At the top of each announcement are various royalty-free photographs of diverse college student pairs and small groups engaged in collaborative activities, discussion, teamwork on laptops in seminar rooms, etc. The power of suggestion plays a role here to suggest to students how the course is set up, the kinds of activities around which it has been designed and convey that everyone is welcome with something valuable to contribute through their presence. Parenthetically, the first slides of each weekly PowerPoint presentation, used to guide in-person meetings on Monday mornings, are similarly illustrated. Royalty free images of college students culled from Pexels.com suggest inclusivity to learners seated around the room, helping establish a more collegial dynamic as instructor and students set out to explore the horror genre together.

Returning to course set-up in D2L, the second online page vital to student navigation and completion of IAH209 Horror Cinema is the content page, which forms the meat of the hybrid course. Arrayed down the right-hand side of the screen are various tabs on which students can click to learn further information about the course, its policies, content, organization, and schedule for example. In addition, students find a variety of other information they can use to assist them in their digital collaborative learning as they move deeper into the course. For instance, the "Overview" tab in the upper left-hand corner of the content page outlines the focus of the course and provides a brief description of the kinds of activities and projects students can expect, plus a bit of background information about the instructor. By clicking the second 'Wellness' tab, students can also learn information about access to on-campus mental health and crisis support, campus safety, and the like. Further down the left side of the page, students can click additional tabs, which open important documents like the syllabus, office hours (with recurring Zoom link), and the semester at a glance. Other tabs reveal information on key assignment/project due dates and the course timetable, to help students plan and organize their own schedules more effectively for the coming 15 weeks.

There follows a 'Course Text(s)' tab, which contains a brief message to the effect that textbooks are no longer required for IAH209 Horror Cinema. This move is a change from pre-Covid when a single text served as the primary source of information about the genre. The course now relies on a variety of readings to supplement the various films that make up IAH209 Horror Cinema. PDFs of these articles, gleaned from various online editions of film and cultural studies journals, are now included within the weekly online course modules. This particular move was a conscious decision made during the height of the pandemic, to help enrolled students, who were off campus, sometimes in remote regions of the United States or overseas. I have kept the

practice in place based on various workshops and resulting discussions with colleagues, in which it became clear that, for many undergraduates in the 2020s, finding and affording textbooks is a challenge.

Continuing down the left side of the course content page for IAH209 Horror Cinema, the 'Project Packets' tab follows. Clicking it transports students to four separate documents, each of which provides specific prompts, associated supporting details, grading rubrics, and additional information for completion of the major projects that are part of the course, three collaborative and one independent (course capstone). I'll return to these four items shortly. Additional tabs provide students with information they might need at different points during the semester Cinema. The "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)" tab includes general questions and answers about the course. A "Student Learning Teams" tab takes students to a list of permanent teams of four or five people each, which is shared at the end of Week Two once course enrollments have stabilized. The tab entitled "Professor Schwartz's Word Cloud" presents key words to describe the kinds of activities and expected practices students will carry out, and the skills they will cultivate, during the 15-week course. Key terms include forethought, planning, collaboration, mindfulness, intellectual agility, core team values, equity, and FERPA Act among others.

Significantly, IAH209 Horror Cinema students are provided with a variety of "collaborative tools" in the D2L course pages, to pave the way toward easier teamwork and intellectual growth. Two such documents include the *Critical Thinking Worksheet: Questions for Determine the Logic [and Meaning] of an Article*, and the *Problem-Solving Template*, both developed by the Foundation for Critical Thinking and presented in that organization's booklet *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools* (2014). Additional mechanisms to widen the pathway to student success in the course include the *Student Success Shopping List*, one of several documents I have created myself, which reiterates the kinds of skills students should cultivate to succeed in IAH209 Horror Cinema, including proactive engagement, self-awareness, attention to detail, timely communication within their student learning team, effective collaboration, careful planning, organization, problem-solving, time management, consistency, ownership, and follow-through. A shopping list graphic created using the *Canva* app forms the basis of this particular document, a response to the oft-posed student question, "What do I have to do to get a 4.0 in this course?" Parenthetically, we use a four-point system to assign grades at Michigan State University rather than traditional letter grades.

Other self-authored tools to assist students in their largely collaborative journey through IAH209 Horror Cinema include the *Cos-E Model of Collaboration: Find Hygge in Your SLT*. By clicking this particular tab, interested students can learn not only how to function best, but also how to become more comfortable working in a team setting. The brief process described within the document includes the following actionable words that learning team members can put into practice each week: communicate, coordinate, collaborate, create, share, evaluate and revise (team habits, decisions, internal team dynamics, and overall approach to the course). By clicking on the Civil Discourse 101 tab, students find a brief outline of a five-step process teammates can use to keep their discussions civil, productive, and moving forward even when examining potentially difficult topic areas, for example horror cinema examined through the related lenses of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and identity as indicated previously.

The most important tabs on the course content page, however, are the 15 course module tabs, corresponding directly to each week of the semester. Clicking on these takes students

directly to the various independent and related collaborative activities they need to plan for and accomplish during each week of the course. The format for each module is the same, to facilitate clarity, routine, ease of navigation, and use by students.

In closer detail, these modules include effective date(s), and the week's overview at the top of the particular module displayed on screen. Scrolling further down the page, students find the details on the various streaming applications they can use to view suggested films for a particular week. Students typically can choose from among several movies, which correspond to the overall topic for that week (horror cinema AND power, privilege, inequity, oppression, justice, etc.). Students, moreover, can find a series of related articles to read in support of the week's focus. Once again, however, they enjoy a number of possible options from which to choose, although student learning teams are advised to communicate and coordinate their viewing and reading activities ahead of their meetings, so that the four or five team members have viewed and read the same materials. That key step permits easier, more productive analysis and discussion of the materials once teams convene.

Further down the course module page, student learning team activities for the week are laid out in more detail (communicate, coordinate, collaborate. . .), as are related independent activities, in which students create and their independent reflection/self-assessment of their learning for the week before submission to the corresponding folder set up of D2L. Typically, the latter activity follows collaborative team analysis, discussion, and application of two to four points, gleaned from the article examined and discussed, to a particular film. The intent is for students to broaden their outlook, understanding of, and insight into how they might interpret and understand a particular horror movie in socio-political terms. Closer discussion of these same 10 independently created reflections and self-assessments of learning follows shortly. Instructor presence is provided with 15 online course modules in the following ways. Guidance to encourage and support the successful navigation of students' collaborative course activities comes in the form of brief six- to 10-minute episodes of podcast audio, recorded and processed each week using Audacity plus Auphonic, both free online audio recording, editing, and mastering software apps. Moreover, students can learn additional tips for inclusive collaboration by watching the series of 10 approximately two-minute explainer animation videos, entitled *Timely Team Tips with Professor Schwartz*, created using the Doodly app. These too are part of the modules between Week Three and Week 14 of the course, during which routine collaboration features most prominently. I embed links to the podcast audio and explainer animations, housed on my Youtube channel, within the course modules in question. The fourth and final D2L course page central to students' online activities in IAH209 Horror Cinema each week is "Assessments," located at the top center of the course home page but visible regardless of the given page students might view. Through it, students can submit their finished independent or collaborative work online and/or review the cumulative scores for these assignments as the semester progresses.

Weekly Collaborative Analysis, Discussion, and Metacognition

A key component of IAH209 Horror Cinema is the fusion of the digital with the collaborative each week of the course between Week Three and Week 14. Teams of four or five students each are determined using a random online application at the end of Week Two, by which time course

enrollments have stabilized. The list of student learning teams is then shared via D2L with contact information (MSU email) provided next to each student's name. Students are alerted during the Friday of Week Two that the team list has been shared to D2L, they need to view it right away, find, and contact the other members of their teams to set up initial meetings. Students are, in addition, advised that, as much as possible, it is a good idea for their teams to organize all of their subsequent weekly meetings for the same day and time early in the semester, while enthusiasm is still high, and before members' respective schedules fill up with commitments of one kind or another.

The expectation is for learning teams in IAH209 Horror Cinema to convene initially during Week Three and work closely together each week through Week 14. Team members can meet face-to-face or use a video conferencing app like Zoom or Microsoft Teams for collaboration. Typically, learning teams are asked to carry out several related activities during this stretch. Most weeks, teams discuss one of the relevant horror films along with a related scholarly article, both of their own choosing. Student learning teams work through their discussion and analysis using a series of primary and related follow-up critical thinking questions for determining the logic and meaning of an article, devised by the *Foundation for Critical Thinking* (2017), to help them get at the heart of what they have read. Through instructions in the online course module for a given week, teams next choose and apply key points from their article to the horror film members have viewed that week. The aim is for students to gain deeper insight into the movie in question through their collaboration and determine how the characters and situations portrayed fit into the larger examination of horror cinema in terms of power, privilege, inequity, oppression, and justice.

Following each of their 10 collaborative discussion and analysis meetings, student learning teams in IAH209 Horror Cinema then split up, so each member can retire to their preferred setting and develop a brief individual reflection on and self-assessment of their learning for the week. These low-risk assignments (10 reflections @ two points each for a total of 20 possible points) – basically, these are “gimmies”—should be an outgrowth of the preceding collaborative discussion and analysis. The repeated prompt in the online course modules asks students to consider both the course material specific to a given seven-day period (What have you learned? What are the broader implications of that? How can you connect that new knowledge to prior knowledge? What do you need to do next?) plus their learning team interactions and processes.

As Chiu and Kuo (2009) explain, this routine practice of metacognition enables students in the course to take stock of the thinking behind how they have approached their work along with the related decisions, individual behaviors, independent and collaborative work habits, and individual practices. Establishing the habit of reflection on and self-assessment of one's learning, raises student awareness of how their choices and actions can help, or possibly hinder, their progress in the course (Rivas et al., 2022). The practice empowers learners by providing another layer of opportunity for them to reexamine, reevaluate, and change tack thereby exercising greater control over their own situations (Stanton et al., 2021).

Shifting back to the digital realm, students in IAH209 Horror Cinema have a range of possible ways they might create and submit these 10 individual self-assessments. They can craft either a traditional 700 to 900-word essay, a 700 to 900-word blog post (using *Blogger*, *Wordpress*, or similar), a four to six-minute episode of podcast audio (using *Audacity*, *Riverside*, *Podbean*, or similar), or, for those more fearless souls, a four-to six-minute unboxing video made using their iPhones. Within each online course module set up in D2L, students address a series of questions

to help them reflect on their learning for the week and structure their self-assessments. Regardless of the precise form their 10 reflections take, students submit the completed work to 10 related folders set up on D2L by 11:59pm East Lansing Time each Friday evening between Week Three and Week 14 of the course. In practice, learners who do not manage to make the deadline, however, have several unannounced grace days to deliver their assignments since it is typically Tuesday or Wednesday the following week before I have opportunity to review submissions and enter two points per reflection into the relevant D2L form. That quiet instructor leniency, an implied extension of sorts, enables students to complete and deliver their assignments, even those who do not quite manage to organize themselves and finish their work by the due dates posted in the weekly course modules.

Three Digital-Collaborative Projects

The use of digital tools to facilitate collaborative discussion and project creation in IAH209 Horror Cinema comes into its own with the three major projects that student learning teams complete as part of their work in IAH209 Horror Cinema. Besides examining course materials most weeks, student learning teams complete three major team projects through close collaboration that, at its best, exhibits effective communication, coordination of individual and overall team efforts, careful planning, organization, follow through, and revision to produce polished end products that present and share students' new knowledge. Ideally, teams take two weeks to develop, refine, and complete each project before submitting their work to the designated folders on D2L at the end of Week Five, 10, and 14. A brief sketch of these three projects better illustrates how the digital-collaborative process works.

For their first team project, worth 20/20 possible points, student members develop a review, discussion, and evaluation of two recent journal articles—less than 10 years old and not already part of the course reading—on gender and sexuality, or race and ethnicity within the horror film genre. Teams must use one of the article databases accessed through the MSU Library's homepage to find and familiarize themselves with several possible articles before narrowing their focus to just two. Teams are asked to enlist the help of an MSU librarian reference librarian, moreover, if the need arises.

As part of the assignment prompt, students choose articles that facilitate deeper understanding of, and insight into two or three of the several possible films that comprise the first roughly five weeks of IAH209 Horror Cinema. Specific examples learning teams might consider weaving into their discussion of, and application of points from the two articles they ultimately select now include *American Psycho* (Harron, 2000), *Candyman* (DaCosta, 2021), *Get Out* (Peele, 2017), *Good Manners* (Rojas & Dutra, 2017), *Hellbent* (Etheridge-Ousts, 2006), *Jack and Diane* (Gray, 2012), *Suspiria* (Guadagnino, 2018), *Thelma* (Trier, 2017), or *Us* (Peele, 2019).

Student learning teams are invited to exercise creativity within the broad parameters of the project prompt and use various digital applications to collaborate, for example Zoom or Microsoft Teams, in the development of their article review and evaluation project. Teams also have the option of presenting their findings in several ways. One possible choice is to present their findings in the form of a television newscast or talk show video, created using the *WeVideo* app. Here, team members assume the roles of newsreaders in the studio, reporters on the scene, and/or passersby on the street who discuss the various points of the two articles under scrutiny.

Alternatively, student teams might choose to do something similar but in the form of a TV talk show panel, for example *The View*, debating a particular discussion point, or points, gleaned from the articles chosen for the project.

Another option that a student learning team might choose for the presentation of their article review and evaluation involves the creation of a brief explainer animation video using free basic versions of apps like *Movely* or *Powtoon*. A comic book or graphic novel, developed using basic versions of online apps like *MakeBeliefsComix*, *Bookcreator*, *StoryboardThat*, offers a third possibility for student learning teams to share their in-depth examinations of the articles chosen for this particular project. Here too, teams enjoy considerable artistic freedom to have fun presenting the points they determine are most worthy of examination from their two articles. As a hallmark of solid scholarship, a key part of this first project is the inclusion of a Works Cited, Reference, or Bibliography page, formatted according to current MLA, APA, or Chicago Style guidelines that presents complete bibliographic information on all sources used or consulted for the project.

For the second collaborative project, also worth 20/20 possible points and due at the end of Week 10, learning teams collaborate to develop a virtual readers' guide on sources about marginality and oppression within the horror film genre. These guides should evaluate and assess for usefulness various secondary sources related to the films viewed as part of their work for IAH209 Horror Cinema. These materials include two recent books, two newly curated academic journal articles, and two web sources, etc. that deal with power, privilege, inequity, oppression, and justice as these concepts relate to specific movies from roughly the middle third of the course. The project prompt advises teams that their readers' guides should also include specific discussion on how the sources compiled are relevant to three-five specific films from the middle portion of the course. Possible examples that learning teams might weave into their readers' guides include *Alien* (Scott, 1979), *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976), *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski, 1968), and *The Stepford Wives* (Forbes, 1975), to more recent, overtly political films like *Get Out* (Peel, 2017), *Master* (Diallo, 2022), *The Candyman* (DaCosta, 2021), and *Us* (Peele, 2019).

Much like their first collaborative project, teams again have options in how they present their work through use of various digital applications available online. Teams create their readers' guide in the form of a digital flipbook using either *Flipsnack*, *Issuu*, or similar. Students learning teams might instead develop a multi-page Infographic to present their readers' guide, using the basic (free) versions of online apps like *Canva*, *Vennage*, or *Piktochart*. Conversely, teams might choose to develop a digital lesson plan for hypothetical 45-minute class discussion using an online app of their choice. Teams choosing this third option should develop a fully scaffolded lesson plan starting with general information that they might present to their hypothetical students, a range of increasingly complex discussion questions about the six sources under examination as well as examples of informed responses that the hypothetical students might provide. Just like the first team project, Like the first team project, Collaborative Project #2 also includes a Works Cited, Reference, or Bibliography page formatted according to current MLA, APA, or Chicago Style guidelines.

Due at the end of Week 14, Collaborative Project #3, again worth 20/20 possible points, asks student learning teams to accomplish two related aims. First, members work together to revisit five or six key films from across the 15-week semester in IAH209 Horror Cinema that relate in

some way to power, privilege, inequity, oppression and justice. Teams are free to choose which films they use for this final collaborative project. In addition, learning teams are asked to don their problem-solving caps and use the retrospective discussion of their chosen films as a springboard into a detailed proposal of one, or possibly two practical, concrete, and detailed solutions to social problems with which society still grapples in the third decade of the 21st century. Here again, student teams consider the issues around race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, caste, class, and identity, connecting fictional cinematic works to the real world.

Much like the first two projects, learning teams have considerable leeway in how they present their collaborative recap of certain films and related problem-solving discussion. The first option is the creation of Interactive e-poster using the basic (free) versions of apps like *Prezi* or *Powerpoint*, with which many students are already familiar. On the other hand, teams might choose to present their work in the form of a multi-page website, constructed using the basic (free) versions on online website applications by the likes of *Wix*, *Squarespace*, or *Wordpress* for example. A third possibility for presenting their final collaborative project is a digital scrapbook are the free versions of apps like *Canva*, *Pixlr*, or *ProjectLife*. Learning teams might instead opt to develop and present their final project in the form of a *Google Slides* presentation. Regardless of how teams choose to present their horror film retrospective and related problem-solving discussion, they must also provide the usual complete bibliographic information for any physical or virtual sources consulted or used for this last team project, in the form of a Works Cited, Reference, or Bibliography page, formatted according to either *MLA*, *APA*, or *Chicago Style* guidelines.

Social Metacognition

A critical and third component for each of the three collaborative projects outlined above is social metacognition, or team reflection on member choices, work habits, and related processes leading to the construction of each collaborative project. As part of the work related to their three projects, team members self-assess their comprehensive approach and, significantly, formulate specific plans to smooth the way for continuing, or future collaborative endeavors as student learning teams move further into the course.

Chiu and Kuo point out that routine metacognition is central to learning because it enables learners to self-monitor personal attitudes, decisions, actions, and related learning (2009). The practice increases learner awareness of personal strengths, weaknesses, and helps students consider ways in which they might address self-defeating modes of thought or behavior (Rivas et al., 2022). In short, self-reflection gives learners an increased sense of self and control over their coursework (Stanton et al., 2021). Social metacognition introduces a collaborative element to the equation, spreading these activities across the members of a student learning team as they work together to increase their knowledge about both the specific subject matter under consideration and the act of working effectively together (Chiu & Kuo, 2009). More significantly, social metacognition has the potential to empower student teams to address internal issues themselves through clear-eyed, frank dialog, to improve overall team cohesion and outcomes in the process (Halmo et al., 2022). For both weekly joint efforts and larger team projects, a willingness and ability to reflect on individual and team choices has a direct bearing on how easily learners shift to and function in the working world of the 21st century where a team-based approach is the norm

and expectation more often than not (Lobczowski et al., 2021). Within IAH209 Horror Cinema, student learning teams use two “tools” to aid their social metacognition following as part of each of the three collaborative projects outlined above. First, is the worksheet entitled *Inventory of Student Learning Team Strengths and Weaknesses* (Moll & Imbracsio 2017), which student learning teams use in concert with the related *Student Learning Team Reflection and Self-Assessment Worksheet*, which I developed. As construction of their three projects winds down in Week Five, Week 10, and Week 14, but before submission of their completed work, team members use both documents to review and discuss, in real time, their overall team effectiveness and determine concrete steps they can take moving forward to streamline their remaining collaboration.

To sum up and clarify, each of the three completed team projects described already should include: 1) the project itself; 2) a works cited, reference, or bibliography page, set up according to current MLA, APA, or Chicago Style guidelines; and 3) a collaboratively written reflection on team practices. The latter item examines and self-assesses team approach, choices, work habits, dynamics, and overall team effectiveness. These team reflections should, in addition, include clear discussion of concrete steps that members can take to pave the way for smoother, more cohesive, and effective collaboration for the remainder of the course.

The Independent Course Capstone Project

The final project for IAH209 Horror Cinema, also worth 20/20 possible points, is not collaborative but independent. It too is metacognitive in nature and asks students to look again at their course-specific learning in terms of the various films and articles they have examined with their learning teams throughout the course. They consult a series of specific questions in the project prompt to guide them once again through the reflective process, help organize their thinking, and structure their capstone assignment. Although each student enrolled in the course is expected to craft their own project, students are invited to begin the process of reviewing their course activity and learning through preparatory collaborative discussion with their student learning teammates one final time before starting their independent work in earnest.

More specifically, finished capstone projects for IAH209 Horror Cinema describe, assess, and appraise students' work in the course, both at the individual level and as part of their student learning team. Project Packet #4 prompts students to first describe the semester in general terms with regard to IAH209 Horror Cinema and their related activities. As part of that overview, students in the course describe the projects, processes, and skills they will discuss in closer detail later. They next revisit three assignments or projects they found most enjoyable and explain why. Students follow by detailing three processes they used to develop the projects they have described and illustrate how the processes were challenging and/or rewarding. Likewise, students further explain three pieces of new knowledge or skills they gained or improved upon during the semester. These points do not have to relate to those mentioned already, but they can. Students further describe how and why they find their new knowledge or improved skills interesting, useful, enjoyable, and/or challenging as part of their independent semester reflection and self-assessment (course capstone project). Finally, students round out their coursework retrospective by presenting their biggest “A-ha Moment” during the semester with an explanation of how that same “A-ha Moment” connects to something they have learned in other courses,

borrowing a piece from Melissa Peet's work on integrative learning (2017). For the conclusion of their capstone projects, students are advised to avoid simply summarizing what they have already said. Instead, they are asked to answer the implied "So, what?" question and leave themselves, their readers, viewers, or listeners, with something interesting and thought provoking to ponder. The project prompt reminds students that their course capstone should be about their individual activities, teamwork, choices, decisions, and related learning in the course rather than become a forum for airing grievances.

In keeping with the general tenor of the course throughout, students in IAH209 Horror Cinema are able to choose the form that their capstone project takes. In sum, either a traditional seven to 10-page essay, a five to six-minute video produced using their iPhones, or a photo montage that they can create using the free version of an online app like *Fotor* or *PicCollage*. Students might instead create a musical playlist using *Pandora*, *Spotify*, or *Youtube*. For both the photo collage and musical playlist options, however, students are reminded to integrate explanatory text to help illustrate, clarify, further explain, or support the points they wish to make about their learning in the hybrid course.

From the Instructor's Laptop: Self-evaluation, Critique, and Thinking Ahead

Most student learning teams do reasonably well, in my experience, with the digital-collaborative processes outlined for IAH209 Horror Cinema, producing work that is interesting and insightful. A few others even exceed those expectations, and a few fall short. Usually because they have begun their work too close to a due date to develop it fully, or because they omit a key part of the project in the rush to submit. There is also a marked tendency in both independent and team reflections/self-assessments to describe independent and team activities in glowing, hyperbolic terms, for example "Awesome," "Fantastic," "Amazing," "I am passionate about my learning." Those results suggest that the digital-collaborative approach to teaching and learning as currently practiced in the course is not without wrinkles to iron out. Most glaring is the issue of collaboration itself. When it works, the approach proves highly effective. Until it does not. Student recognition of course expectations, related buy-in, and consistent teamwork without dysfunction are necessary for digital-collaborative learning to function optimally. Still, in a 50-seat course with 10 learning teams, the occasional issue or two arises at some point along the way during each 15-week semester. Some learning teams struggle despite the not insignificant amount of instructor-supplied support already in place as part of the D2L course pages set-up for IAH209 Horror Cinema. Despite instructor intent along with course preparation and revision over time, we should nevertheless remember that it is impossible to anticipate every possible issue, and there will always be student challenges for instructors to address despite efforts to the contrary (Allen, 2016). That point is true regardless of course modality. It is, perhaps, in our best interest, as instructors, to expect occasional student learning team hiccups, take proactive steps to minimize the potential for learning disruption, and be pleasantly surprised when issues do not arise.

A concrete step toward alleviating the problem of student compliance is asking learning teams to create and refine a list of core team values and expectations, on which all members can agree, during their initial meeting in Week Three. Determining their own core values provides one more way for student learning teams to take responsibility for their work. The practice also sets up learning teams to ensure that all members self-monitor and meet the criteria for a functioning

team throughout their collaboration. Another issue to consider when it comes to the fusion of the digital with the collaborative in IAH209 Horror Cinema is the digital divide. The issue is not necessarily as pronounced as in the recent past, or even an issue for those students physically on campus. But the recent pandemic and related online learning illustrate that ready access to tablets, laptops, desktop PCs, and reliable internet remain a challenge with which some students continue to struggle. By no means should that be an indictment of teaching and learning via digital and collaborative means. However, it is one facet of the practice that instructors should keep in mind during the planning, design, or redesign of a digital-collaborative course regardless of the ways in which content is delivered, discussed, and student knowledge assessed.

Thirdly, there is a need for a concise generative AI statement in the IAH209 Horror Cinema syllabus, online course modules, and project packets to head off any unforeseen issues with plagiarism regardless of student intent. Thus far, no obvious problems with student use of applications like ChatGPT or Goggle Bard have emerged during the most recent iteration of the course during Spring 2023. Indeed, students seemed only marginally interested in the use of either during a course meeting in early March 2023, when the lesson plan for the day included time for guided exploration and discussion of the potential for legitimate use of generative AI as part of the teaching and learning process. Students' apparently blasé attitude toward ChatGPT, Google Bard, and similar applications will no doubt change as updated versions continue to appear and the potential for academic dishonesty becomes attractive to a few. My own thinking is that, rather than attempt to police our students, who are young adults after all, and restrict them from using generative AI in their independent and collaborative coursework, we should treat it as yet another tool that offers considerable possibility. That might be as simple as, yet again, providing clear guidance to students on acceptable use, and requiring clear citations for any use of AI just like we ask students to do already for physical and digital sources consulted in the development of their papers or projects. Last, IAH209 Horror Cinema should be combed through carefully to address any lingering accessibility issues that might prevent some students from utilizing course materials and the chance to learn, create, and share knowledge alongside more abled teammates. Checklists for accessibility and compliance with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) will be helpful here to ensure that the course meets the needs of all students, ensuring equal opportunity for enrollees. To date, there have been no issues raised about this point, but that does not mean further adjustment and revision are unnecessary. This area is another one to address before the course runs again in Spring 2024.

Conclusion

While based on anecdotal observation to this point, the combination of digital learning with collaborative learning in IAH209 Horror Cinema, a hybrid general education course, clearly works for many students. A merger of the two approaches seems to motivate undergraduate learners in ways that traditional pedagogy does not in the third decade of the 21st century. By means of a de-centered classroom, established learning teams play a more active role in their own learning process, enhancing their knowledge about course material, and how it connects to society. Team members simultaneously develop digital expertise while cultivating next generation competencies through that close work with diverse others. The interdependence fostered within student teams, moreover, increases the likelihood that members will learn through that interaction, setting the

stage for a free exchange of ideas that may one day lead to “transformative” change in society (Hooks, 2010).

For many students in IAH209 Horror Cinema, the combination of digital and cloud-based tools with collaborative activities infuses their learning about, and mastery of course materials with interesting creative possibilities that tap into their technology-based interests in a way that more traditional forms of assessment do not. The method, in addition, appeals to and resonates with different learning styles and ability levels across most of the first- through fourth-year learners who populate the course. While all college and university courses might benefit to some degree from the fusion of digital with collaborative learning, general education courses like this one stand to gain most from the practice given the lower priority many students typically give to core requirements. Even so, a digital-collaborative approach tends to motivate learners more effectively than does the usual cycle of lecture, quiz, midterm, quiz, research paper, and final exam. At the same time, students in IAH209 Horror Cinema have the chance to acquire and refine numerous practical skills that are directly applicable to the world off campus. Thanks to routine team cultivation of critical thinking, project management, problem-solving, conflict resolution, and intellectual agility among other practices, digital-collaborative learning enables students in the course to master key next generation skills, paving the way for a smoother transition from campus to the working world after graduation (Dede & Richards, 2020). Digital-collaborative learning, then, has the potential to bridge the gap between the theoretical and the practical spheres. Students learn to interpret and understand horror cinema as social commentary and critique while at the same time cultivating highly sought 21st century skills through their course activities.

A few related caveats are important to keep in mind however. First, clear guidance and consistent support from instructors is necessary for digital-collaborative learning to realize its full potential. Second, routine attendance also plays an important role since less diligent students still risk running into trouble when they skip weekly meetings, unwittingly opt out of collaborative activities, or ignore other course expectations. Third, while a digital collaborative approach offers many benefits then, it is not a panacea for the ways in which students might derail their own learning. At the bare minimum, a willingness to engage throughout the 15-week course remains necessary. That inclination is not always a given for every learner enrolled in a 50-seat general education course like IAH209 Horror Cinema. Last, these challenges should not be taken as a vote against digital-collaborative learning. The approach has much to recommend it to faculty in higher education, who are charged with teaching young people unfamiliar with the pre-digital world and, often, the concept of effective collaboration with others. Indeed, undergraduates in the third decade of the 21st century have grown up inhabiting the virtual realm, and this feature of life is unlikely to change. Rather than ignore that fact, turn a blind eye to the affordances offered by digital-collaborative learning, or suggest that the approach does not work, it makes better sense from a pedagogical standpoint to meet our students where they are. A merger of the digital with the collaborative can work to our advantage when it comes to engaging and motivating post-secondary learners in the 2020s. For most, digital-collaborative opportunities resonate well, facilitate their learning in more nuanced ways, and better prepare young intellects for the eventual transition from college and university campuses to professional life. In that respect, teaching faculty should exercise the same flexibility that we seek to impart, and expect from our students

(Dede & Richards, 2020), and consider reconfiguring at least some courses already in our teaching portfolios as digital-collaborative learning opportunities.

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