Active Learning Classroom Research Profile

Comparative Literature 397: Cellphone Cultures

Instructor: Dr. Stephen Groening

- 36 undergraduate students enrolled, mix of Freshman, Sophomores, Juniors and Seniors
- Class met twice a week for 1 hour 50 minutes in ALC 136

Active Learning in Cellphone Cultures

Steve Groening greets students by name as they enter the classroom and take their seats. He begins class with a brief overview of the day’s activity: Groening has carefully prepared a number of modules within the Canvas LMS that include YouTube videos and links to related websites. Student groups will analyze these artifacts using ideas and concepts from course readings. Groening encourages students to work at their own pace, and notes that they might not get through all the modules. He encourages them to do the modules in whatever order they wish. “Or just do the fun ones,” he adds.

Students immediately plug in laptops and get to work, with one person at each table taking on the role of group recorder. The atmosphere is lively and sometimes distracting, with different videos playing at different tables. Groening circulates, pausing to observe each group for a minute or two before moving on. A student at one table announces to her small group that she doesn’t understand a question, and her classmates help to clarify. Another adds “Well, let me ask you this…” and the conversation about communication as a human need deepens. In the next module, students watch an old AT&T commercial, and get briefly sidetracked evaluating the “reach out and touch someone” jingle. Collective laughter breaks out at another table, as they read through assigned selections of posts on social media sites damnyouautocorrect.com (Damn You Autocorrect) and fmylife.com (Fuck my Life). Groening passes by, views the posts and acknowledges that he, too, was pulled in by their content. A little more scrolling and a student gently suggests, “Let’s get back to where we were.”

Such “brain breaks,” as Groening calls them, are common in the self-directed groups, as is the accompanying self-regulation. Groening acknowledges the tangents, sometimes participating in them before guiding students back to their task. The result is an informal camaraderie between instructor and students. When one group has a question and Groening is on the other side of the room, the group presses the table light. Groening arrives and jokes “should I take your order?” but becomes serious as he kneels to listen to the quandary. At another table, Groening sits briefly to break down points from a reading. Moving on, he gently encourages a passive student to take a more active role: “Has [student
name one] been typing answers this whole time? [Student name two] why don’t you take over?”
Elsewhere, Groening high-fives a student in response to a great comment.

Groening moves frequently around the classroom, visiting each table a dozen times during the two hour class, observing and intervening if necessary. He also checks his computer at the podium to review student responses as they’re submitted through Canvas, tracking real time progress and responding to groups that seemed to be struggling with a specific question. By using Canvas in this fashion, Groening provides feedback on the content of submissions as students proceed, offering praise or suggestions for further issues they might consider. Their answers in Canvas can also be accessed later if needed.

At the end of class, Groening provides an overview of what will happen next time they meet and reminds students to bring their field research. While some students begin packing up, others remain focused on their work, committed to completing a final response even after class is dismissed.

**Pedagogical Goals and Challenges**

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<th>Teaching and learning goals:</th>
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<tr>
<td>● Enhance critical thinking skills</td>
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<td>● Model and encourage intellectual rigor</td>
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<td>● Facilitate student learning through a variety of modes (video, social media, reading, writing, discussion)</td>
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<td>● Enhance learning through collaborative group work</td>
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<th>Pedagogical challenges:</th>
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<td>● Finding the right alternative to lecture</td>
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<td>● Varying levels of student preparation</td>
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<td>● Fixed classroom tables</td>
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Groening is new to the UW and to the Odegaard Active Learning Classrooms, though not new to teaching. Having taught a version of the Cellphone Cultures course at another institution, Groening was attracted to teach the course in the ALC because he thought the design would better support his technology needs and group work exercises. Prior to coming to the UW, Groening taught in classrooms with flexible furniture that allowed him to rearrange tables and chairs as needed for day’s activities. Fixed tables in the ALC prohibited this practice, but the monitors and power outlets at each table were well-suited to class activities, which had students making frequent use of laptops, tablets, and cell phones.

Comparing his experiences teaching at UW with those at his previous institution, Groening believes that the quarter schedule is better suited to “flipped classrooms” and active learning. In a semester system, Groening was able to assign more homework, but, with less time in the classroom, he said that “the ‘information transfer’ had to be more intense so there was more lecture and full class discussions.” Now in a quarter system, Groening has had to assign less readings and homework, “but more time in class
means that I can set the students loose on projects without worrying about it spilling into the next session.” In previous teaching experiences in traditional classroom spaces, it was Groening’s practice to begin class with a “mini-lecture” to frame the discussion: “Previously I would jot down five to ten notes on a post-it for the class lecture. I would run class discussion off these notes and student questions until they ran out. I couldn’t do that in this classroom.” Groening said it “took a little while” to figure out an alternative solution—carefully scaffolded and substantial group activities that engaged students in critical examination of the readings and various artifacts. “I had to go over the readings and pull out sections, scour the Internet for video clips and other things that helped demonstrate central concepts, formulate questions about these concepts and their limitations, and then get students to apply these concepts to everyday experiences. It was a much more intensive prep than I had to do in the past.”

Instead of listening to a lecture, Groening’s students now worked in collaborative groups to make sense of the course readings, guided by Groening’s questions in Canvas and his targeted contributions to each table’s discussion. Other course activities, such as a silent class discussion that took place entirely on Twitter, were intentionally designed as experiential investigations into the implications of technology use and social behavior. Groening noted pros and cons to the group activities. He saw advantages in the fact that students had clear expectations about what they were going to do and the kinds of ways they needed to think and work together. He also thought the social interaction helped students realize that there are different perspectives on the readings and different understandings of the content, and that they could build an understanding together. “I feel like the more they interact, the more comfortable they get at saying they don’t understand something; students are often anxious in front of their peers about appearing too stupid or too smart.” Groening felt he came to know his students better, what they were learning and who was most engaged. But Groening observed that the groups were only as effective as the students were prepared, and that the performance of the groups, and the participation by different members, varied. They also appeared to look to Groening for answers less than they would in a traditional classroom. While there were benefits to this, Groening also noted a cost in lower levels of his own interaction with students around the course material.

The student-instructor interaction was something Groening valued from his use of lecture in the past. Groening would integrate relevant personal anecdotes in lecture, and in so doing, help his students get to know him as a person and feel comfortable approaching him with questions. In the ALC, Groening used his tableside conversations to try to share similar anecdotes and establish the same kind of rapport. Lectures and whole-class discussions were also a means Groening used in the past to encourage a high level of academic and intellectual rigor in the course, a goal he felt he struggled to achieve with students in the ALC. Groening wasn’t sure if the ALC group activities encouraged a degree of “instrumentality” in the way students approached their work.

Groening isn’t done experimenting with active learning. He noted ways that he would like to modify and refine his teaching with the next course: “I could be intervening in groups more, utilizing the classroom

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more dynamically, changing the makeup of the groups and coming together as a whole class.” Groening observed that there’s a certain camaraderie and shared investigative spirit among instructors in the ALC; in the transition from one class to the next, instructors often ask one another, “How’d it go?” That’s not something he hears teaching in a traditional classroom.

**Student Experience**
Several students commented on the engaging, relaxed class atmosphere they felt in Comp Lit 397. Students described the class as “more interactive” than others they had taken in traditional classrooms, a quality that for many also led to greater comfort in participating. Students felt strongly that group work added to their learning in the course. “[Having class in the ALC] made it easier to learn because we always worked in groups and the teacher was always available to help,” one student commented. Another student said, “I enjoyed being across from classmates instead of seeing the back of their head.”

Students noted that they used a wide range of technology in the course and reported that the ALC supported effective group work, by improving organization and giving students access to tools for collaboration. While one student commented that the range of technologies used was at times “overwhelming,” more students found the ALC well suited to the class activities. One student said the ALC design and learning activities “made group work very cohesive,” and another described it as “very collaborative, very technologically innovative and easy to use.”

**Best Practices from Cellphone Cultures**
Groening achieved a learning environment in which students were co-participants in the learning process through a variety of practices:

- Granting choice in assignments; encouraging self-organization in groups, self-regulation to keep on task
- Respectfully engaging passive participants
- Greeting students by name, taking a posture on same level as students (sitting, kneeling) when joining a group discussion
- Carefully scaffolding assignments; tracking student progress through frequent, brief visits to each group; offering timely feedback to support student success
- Designing small group assignments (7-8 members) that benefited from multiple perspectives, collaborative effort
- Intervening in group work only as needed in order to nudge activity in constructive direction; giving primary responsibility for learning to group

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