

# Enhanced Teaching and Learning Strategies Applied to LIT365: Contemporary Literary Theory

by Dr. Julie Wilhelm

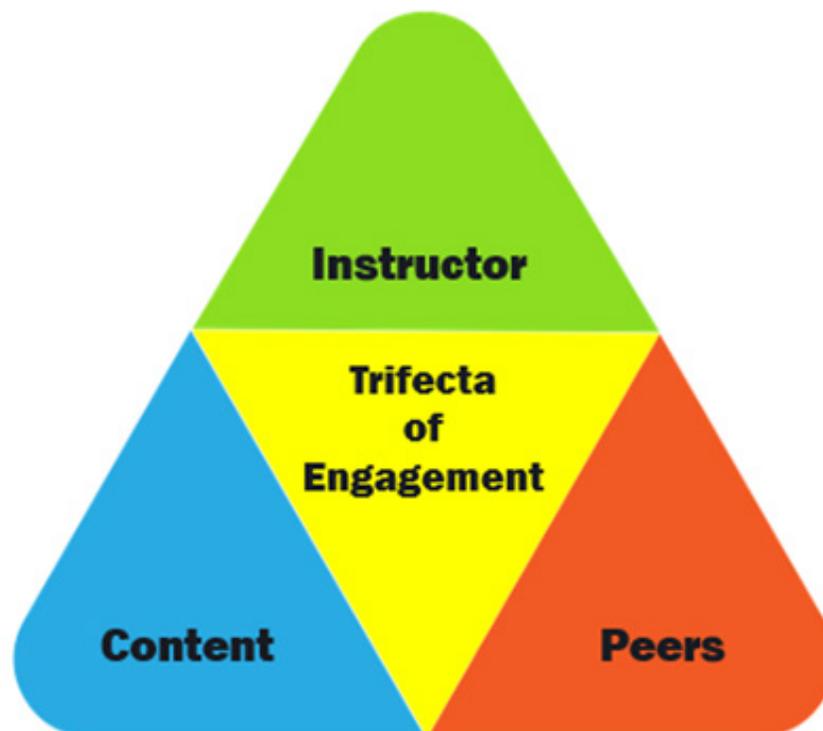


## Dr. Julie Wilhelm, Associate Professor in COLS

Professor Wilhelm participated in the Online Teaching Professional Development program as part of the National University System Innovation Grant. In this program, faculty participants piloted a course called Enhanced Teaching & Learning Strategies that consists of engaging online teaching practices using Blackboard tools.

The course presents teaching strategies using the Trifecta of Engagement model in which students, in order to be successful, need to be engaged with: (1) their course content, (2) their peers, and (3) their instructor.

Faculty provide evidence of how they applied the Trifecta of Engagement model when teaching a real course through case studies and presentations.



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## Introduction

I recently participated in a pilot of the Enhanced Teaching and Learning Strategies (ETLS) course, which focused on helping faculty develop tools to foster students' engagement with their peers, their instructor, and the course content. I will describe student engagement strategies and tools I used in my June contemporary literary theory class, drawing on what I learned from the ETLS course, and reflect on what worked and what might be improved.

## A Welcome Video Course Tour

Because I usually teach courses that I have designed and spend time revising my online courses before I teach them, they are familiar virtual spaces for me by the time a course goes live. I have my preferred shortcuts to the interactive spaces of the course, and the arrangement of content items makes sense to me; after all, in most cases, I organized the class. Taking the ETLS faculty development course gave me the opportunity to be a participant in a Blackboard course designed by someone else, which helped me to appreciate what a student might experience. Even in a well-organized course, it can be confusing, particularly in the first few days of the class, to figure out where to look for what. Students who are new to Blackboard and/or distance learning must feel especially disoriented.

This experience convinced me of the value of creating a web tour of my courses. In the ETLS course, I learned to use a screen-capturing tool, Kaltura CaptureSpace Lite, to make a video in little more than the time it takes to record it. In the eight-minute course tour I created for my June class, I explained the organization of the course, highlighted important parts of the course outline, and introduced students to Blackboard tools such as the "subscribe" discussion forum function and the different views of threaded discussions. I also navigated to some important spaces of the course, seen through the student view, and modeled how students might engage with some of the unusual activities of the course such as the wiki glossary.

My goal for the tour was that it would not only show students how to engage with the course, but also open up the instructor-student line of communication and provide context for future communications. To help frame the video in that way—as not a scripted, pre-existing element of the course but the beginning of a spontaneous learning experience—I posted the video as part of an announcement on Monday of Week One. In the video, I invite students to email me or post in the Virtual Office if they have any questions about the content. However, in the future, to



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better encourage student response, I am considering posting the tour as part of a threaded discussion and concluding the tour with a couple of open-ended questions to which students might respond.

## A Wiki Glossary

The Enhanced Teaching and Learning Strategies course inspired me to consider new opportunities for student-to-student interaction in my online classes. Since most of the peer interaction in the course occurs through threaded discussions, I created a low-stakes glossary activity using the Blackboard wiki tool so students could collaborate in a less structured way. The wiki tool enables students to quickly create a basic website by adding text, links, images, and pages. It also gives students the opportunity to revise each other's work as they collaboratively create a single product, in this case a glossary of important concepts in literary theory.

Students were asked to offer one substantive contribution each week of the course for a total of four contributions from each student. Here is the list I shared with students of possible ways for them to engage with each other and the wiki:

- *identify what you take to be a key term from the lectures and reading assignments and add it to the glossary with an initial definition;*
- *complicate an existing definition, add an additional definition to an existing term, or explain how a particular school or theorist has taken up a concept;*
- *quote, paraphrase, or summarize (depending upon the nature of the source) a source or sources to elaborate upon a concept;*
- *organize or synthesize existing wiki content to make an entry more cohesive and user-friendly;*
- *add an example of a term (with an explanation) or quote a relevant passage (with an accompanying explanation/analysis) related to a term;*
- *add an image, video, or website link to a term with an explanation of how it enhances one's understanding of a concept;*
- *come up with your own way to contribute to our glossary! The wiki is open-ended, so feel free to be creative.*



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The assignment prepared students to explain in their own language key concepts from the course and evaluate and synthesize different sources of information to prepare their entries. Students also practiced using MLA citation style as they compiled a works consulted list for each entry. A section of the final exam was based on wiki content, focusing on the terms that students most thoroughly defined. I introduced the assignment with this information to foster engagement: students knew that their work could not only prepare them for the final exam, but also influence final exam content.

The Blackboard wiki tool includes a behind-the-scenes log of the saves and changes of each student in the class, which is accessible through the gradebook. Wiki participation does take some time to grade because the instructor needs to compare different versions of the same page to see exactly what a student contributed. However, I graded the wiki only once at the end of the course and I had a small class, so the grading time was manageable. I know some instructors prefer non-Blackboard wikis, which is worth investigating for future versions of the assignment, though I like that the Blackboard wiki is linked to the gradebook.

The wiki revision history revealed that students primarily added content beneath what others contributed or opted to add new terms rather than interact with classmates' work. In a couple of instances, students even created redundant pages, I assume to keep their work separate, which revealed that I might better explain the collaborative nature of the wiki. Ideally, students would feel comfortable not only adding new paragraphs on existing entries but also revising their classmates' contributions. In the future, I would like to find a way to encourage more substantive peer revision of wiki content. I might experiment with playing a more active role in revising entries early in the class to model this kind of engagement.

Overall, I am happy with the final product of the glossary and students' engagement with the wiki assignment. It meant that students completed the assigned reading with the expectation that they needed to identify important concepts each week, which promoted active reading practices, and students compared different theorists' understandings of the same key term, a higher order thinking skill that prepared them for the first essay. In addition, I suspect students were more invested in their contributions to the wiki because they were writing for a peer audience rather than just the instructor, and students benefited from each other's work, which



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fostered a sense of community. Students did well on the key term section of the final exam, for which I believe this activity helped to prepare them.

## Discussion-Based Final Paper Project

One of the problems I have encountered with formal writing assignments is that students often either do not have a sense of audience or, due to false assumptions about professors' expectations, write in a stilted style to sound more "academic." I used peer engagement to help to address this. Specifically, I created a final writing assignment that built upon an asynchronous debate in a threaded discussion. The assignment specified that students' audience for the essay was other members of the class. To make this specification real, in addition to submitting their final essays in an "assignment" folder, students attached their essays to final posts in the debate forum so classmates could read them. Students were asked to persuade classmates of their position and draw on theorists from the course to support their position. This protocol created a more authentic audience for students, and the debate equipped students with knowledge of counter-positions and multiple perspectives on issues so they could write more thoughtful position papers.

Aspects of this assignment might be improved for the future. The requirement that students engage with three readings from the course led to organizational problems in some of the essays. Also, my June class was small, and for the debate students split into three different groups/threads based on their topic choice. In the future, the debate might be more successful with a larger class or fewer topics so students can engage with more classmates before writing the essay.

Though aspects could be improved, the debate and paper assignment were generally successful. Because students were sharing their essays with classmates and writing for the audience that they had been engaging with all month, they generally wrote in clear, concise prose and presented compelling arguments. Students also seemed comfortable taking positions on theorists' ideas that they had initially found intimidating, which I attribute in part to students' opportunity to try out new ideas and develop their ideas through discussion and debate.



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## Conclusion

My experience applying the strategies and knowledge I learned in the ETL course was positive. It was helpful to have a space where I could try out new tools before using them in my classes, and having new tools at my disposal has energized my teaching. Not surprisingly, I have found that increasing one kind of engagement, such as student-student or student-content engagement, positively affects student engagement in other areas of a course.

