



The Great Zombie Collaboration

*Eight professors with wide-ranging expertise collaborate on
an epic interdisciplinary course*

Overview

It started as a joke. Professors from the virtual campus at HACC, Central Pennsylvania's Community College, were brainstorming creative ideas for new interdisciplinary courses when someone said, "It's not like we could do a zombie course." Or could they? It was the ideal subject for studying from a wide range of perspectives—in fact, there were so many possibilities for collaboration that the course grew to include eight faculty members across five disciplines and seven different specialties. "Zombies in Contemporary Culture" was born, a groundbreaking experiment in academic teamwork made possible by Brightspace.

For breathing life into a seemingly impossible idea and offering an academically rigorous online course with a twist, HACC won the 2014 Desire2EXCEL Collaboration Award.

The following Professors were involved in the development and execution of the course:

- Dr. JuliaGrace J. Jester, Interim Department Chair for Social Sciences
- Matthew Harris, Chair of Assessment and Assistant Professor of Humanities
- Jason Beaudin, Assistant Professor of English and Humanities and Chair of the Center for Innovation and Teaching Excellence
- Rick Albright, Interim Associate Dean for Academic Affairs
- Kathleen Conley, Assistant Professor, Library & Information Resources
- Dave Wartell, Coordinator, Center for Design & Instruction
- Nicole L. Ernst, Associate Professor, Geospatial Technology
- Cynthia Schanke, Instructional Technology Analyst, Lebanon and Virtual Campus

AT A GLANCE

Client	HACC, Central Pennsylvania's Community College
Students	nearly 21,000
Level	Undergraduate
Solutions	Brightspace Online and Blended Learning solution

CHALLENGE

- Provide a forum for faculty to collaborate across disciplines
- Create one easy-to-access location for all course content
- Ensure a cohesive, branded look and feel for the course
- Improve completion rates for online student evaluations

SOLUTION

- Leverage emerging technologies to facilitate collaboration and teamwork
- Customize newspaper format to house all course content
- Support a variety of delivery methods
- Embed evaluation forms directly within the course

RESULT¹

- Serving as a model to improve teaching methods at the college
- Doubled the rate of online student evaluation completions on average
- Heightened student engagement



Challenge

CROSS-FACULTY COLLABORATION WAS A CRITICAL BARRIER TO OVERCOME

Forget zombies. What was really frightening about the course was the prospect of such a broad collaboration. “One of my colleagues jokingly suggested that trying to get eight professors to work together would be like herding cats,” laughs Dr. JuliaGrace Jester, Interim Department Chair of Social Sciences at HACC.

“As a group, we had to make all of the decisions for the class, plan out all of the assignments and discuss how the course should look. It was really pushing the limits of collaboration at HACC,” she says. “There’s never been a course like this here—usually only two teachers collaborate.”

As far as interdisciplinary classes go, the breadth of perspectives was awe-inspiring. The course examined zombies through the lens of psychology, philosophy, mythology, literature, media studies, biology, geographic information systems, and library studies.

The vast number of disciplines included meant that basic course organization, such as creating assignments and grading, had the potential to be a logistical nightmare.

HOW TO COORDINATE METHODS AND MATERIALS

Dr. Jester tells us that the most daunting aspect of creating the course was managing so many varied components and teaching styles.

“We all have different backgrounds,” she says. “For instance, I design my classes very consistently and very rigidly. Other professors prefer open-ended assignments. There was a lot of negotiation on how to combine all of our different approaches.”

And what to do with the wealth of materials that each professor brought to the course? They needed to be presented in a cohesive fashion under the over-arching zombie theme—and students required simple access to it all.

A NEED TO IMPROVE ONLINE STUDENT EVALUATIONS

Beyond creating the actual Zombies in Contemporary Culture course, Dr. Jester explains that HACC professors grappled with another issue: “Our return rate on online student evaluations was ridiculously low. I think it was because students had to leave Brightspace, log into something else, and then it took three more clicks to get to the form. If you had a class of twenty-five students you were lucky to get two responses.”

“With so little feedback,” says Dr. Jester, “it was almost impossible to improve teaching methods. “This was a good course to try something new. It’s such an investment, we wanted to see what we could learn from it and what we could do differently. We always knew it was possible to embed evaluations into Brightspace—it was time to take that step.”



“We are eight professors at different campuses on totally different schedules and so we had to be creative. We really pushed the limits of technology. Brightspace gave us a central place to work on the course, even at the same time.”

Dr. JuliaGrace Jester, Interim Department Chair of Social Sciences
HACC, Central Pennsylvania's Community College



Solution

BRIGHTSPACE PROVIDES A FORUM FOR TEAMWORK

For Jason Beaudin, Assistant Professor of English and Humanities, Virtual Campus at HACC and another of the eight professors involved in the zombie collaboration, the big advantage of Brightspace was that it facilitated teamwork on exams and assignments.

“Rather than having a single test on microbiology, a single test on philosophy, et cetera, we were able to have faculty members work on specific questions in their subject area on their own time, and then compile them into a single exam,” says Beaudin. “To accomplish this, we took advantage of the Brightspace platform’s ability to allow multiple individuals to have editing privileges,” he adds. Each faculty member was able to contribute questions to a quiz and Brightspace handled distribution of the test questions to the class.

“Grading the exams was similarly streamlined. Professors could enter Brightspace, access the quiz submissions and grade the questions they had contributed to, and then the student’s score would reflect the compilation of those evaluations. That way, content experts were evaluating performance on every question. And if a professor found that an answer had wandered into another area, it was easy to give another faculty member a heads up. Having a single location for reviewing submissions made it easier to discuss things and arrive at a score,” he says. So not only did Brightspace make collaboration possible, it made it extremely effective with minimal time and effort.

ONE PLACE FOR EVERYTHING ZOMBIE

To unite all of the diverse disciplines under the zombie theme, the faculty paid special attention to the Brightspace homepage. Enhanced visuals and customization allowed them to create a unique newspaper format. “Our Daily Brains” was a central location for all course content.

Zombie-specific navbars, themes, and custom links created a unified look and feel. Dr. Jester says, “The over-arching zombie theme helped students and faculty alike see the connections between discipline-specific lessons and get immersed in the narrative. In a face-to-face class we would never have been able to cover such a diverse amount of material. It would have been a shallow exploration of these topics.”

She credits Brightspace with having the tools that support innovative solutions. “We made great use of our ability to play with the appearance of the course. We created all of our own widgets and we renamed as much as we could. Rather than having a “syllabus” tab we had a “Survival Syllabus,” and we called the content tab “Survival Guide.” The flexibility of Brightspace allowed us to easily create a unique, branded Zombie course that helped heighten student engagement.”

Solution continued

A VARIETY OF TOOLS FOR A VARIETY OF TEACHING STYLES

Another advantage of Brightspace is the sheer number of teaching tools available. Each professor was able to find a comfort zone—a way to use the platform that best suited his or her personal style.

The course consisted of written lessons, recorded lessons, Prezi lectures and iTunes podcasts, all embedded in Brightspace. Face-to-face lectures were augmented by a simultaneous virtual classroom space, moderated by a faculty member. Professors followed student progress through the Gradebook tool, the Dropbox tool, and the View Progress tool, all on Brightspace, as well as during the usual student-teacher class meetings.

How did the extreme use of technology impact the class? Dr. Jester believes it actually boosted student engagement: “By changing up the format of the lessons it didn’t feel repetitive and the variety really kept them interested.”



EVALUATIONS RIGHT IN BRIGHTSPACE—A SIMPLE SOLUTION

To improve the current rate of student participation in evaluations, the team simplified the process by creating an evaluation form and embedding it directly in their Brightspace homepage. When students logged in, they had instant access to the form.

Dr. Jester says, “We wanted to test out a way to improve the rate and method of online student evaluations at our institution. We think students are more likely to respond if we make it easy.”



**AN “UNIMAGINABLE”
COLLABORATION SETS A NEW STANDARD**

Although there were skeptics at the outset, the Zombie course successfully challenged the limits of interdisciplinary courses. “We’ve presented at several conferences on how to collaborate with so many professors in an effective way. If trying to get eight professors to work together is like herding cats, then we managed to herd cats very successfully,” says Dr. Jester.

Members of the faculty have presented on their collaboration at the 5th Annual Conference on Higher Education Pedagogy at Virginia Tech and Wilmington University’s 5th annual Teaching and Learning with Technology Symposium, Technology in Bloom.

“Together the eight of us created a cohesive course that students love; a course that’s capable of winning awards; a course that draws incredible interest because others can’t imagine collaborating on this level. We managed it, and we created something really cool,” she says.

**BETTER TEACHING HAS A RIPPLE
EFFECT THROUGHOUT THE COLLEGE**

For all eight professors, the Zombie course was a chance to experiment with online tools and discover fresh ways of engaging with students. Dr. Jester says, “We took the lessons we learned from this class to our own classes in our own areas and made changes.” In this way, positive results of the Zombie collaboration are being enjoyed throughout the college.

She explains how it made them better teachers: “Honestly, you can deliver your own classes over and over again and never try new things. This course opened us up to new ways to reach students. We all took away something that will make us better teachers.”

Results continued

TWICE THE USUAL STUDENT EVALUATIONS

In Dr. Jester's experience at the college, it's most common to receive only two to four student evaluations from an online class of twenty or more students. With the form embedded in Brightspace, the Zombie course received eight out of eighteen. "For a first try, that's a great increase."

As a result of feedback, the faculty found that their collaboration was a success from the students' perspective. "Overall, students loved the class," says Dr. Jester. "They especially liked having so many different professors and perspectives, and the fact we could do really cool stuff in the face-to-face class because so much content was online."

Indeed, students used their evaluations to heap praise on both the course and the professors. For example²:

"The variety of professors added multiple aspects to the class. Many specialties were covered thus making the course more interesting, more successful."

"...I enjoyed the collaboration, and having it online made it easier for me to participate fully."



"This was an incredibly cool class to have as my last class at HACC. I loved the broad range of educational areas it covered while staying within the bounds of the zombie topic..."

"...all of the professors were great! It was clear that you were all just as excited as we were about the class...I hope that this class is offered again and again, and that other faculty see how well it works and consider developing other classes along these lines."

GREAT COLLABORATION INSPIRES MORE OF THE SAME

What more might be achieved with further large scale interdisciplinary collaborations? Faculty members at the virtual campus at HACC are eager to find out. The success of the Zombie course has inspired plans for similar courses. Subject suggestions include post-apocalypse and post-humanism.

Says Beaudin, "Once you're a part of something like this class, it's impossible to stop thinking about other exciting innovations that can be used to improve the educational experience."

About D2L

D2L is the software leader that makes the learning experience better. The company's cloud-based platform—Brightspace—is not a common one-size-fits-all learning management system (LMS). It's easier to use, more flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, you can personalize the experience for every learner to deliver real results. The company is also a world leader in learning analytics: its platform predicts learner performance so that you can take action in real time to keep them on track. Brightspace is used by learners in higher education, K-12, and the enterprise sector, including the Fortune 1000. D2L has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore. | www.brightspace.com

CONTACT US

Phone: 1-519-772-0325 (Worldwide)

Toll Free: 1-888-772-0325 (North America)
0-808-234-4235 (United Kingdom and Europe)
0-800-452-069 (New Zealand)
1-800-656-210 (Australia)
0-800-891-4507 (Brazil)

Fax: 1-519-772-0324

Email: info@brightspace.com

Twitter: @Brightspace

Web: www.brightspace.com | www.D2L.com

iTunes is a trademark of Apple Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

© 2015 D2L Corporation.

The D2L family of companies includes D2L Corporation, D2L Ltd, D2L Australia Pty Ltd, D2L Europe Ltd, D2L Asia Pte Ltd, and D2L Brasil Soluções de Tecnologia para Educação Ltda.

All D2L marks are trademarks of D2L Corporation. Please visit D2L.com/trademarks for a list of D2L marks.