

Virtual Me, Virtual U

BY MICHAEL HANLEY

How schools are using technology to transform the halls of higher education.

In 2009, Columbia College Chicago won an award from the [NASPA Foundation](#) for excellence in the programming of student union and student activities. Here's the rub: Columbia doesn't have a physical student union.

The college won the award for developing an online student community called [The Loop](#), a completely virtual student center. Social networking initiatives like The Loop are having a profound impact on every aspect of higher education, ranging from recruitment and retention to pedagogy and student collaboration. And as the virtual campus starts to influence the design of the physical one, things really get interesting.

Staying in the Loop

Columbia's Matthew Green says the [NASPA award](#) is further indication that the boundary between bricks and clicks on campus is blurring. "Conceptually, a student union is a place where students meet and hang out," he says. Green is the school's director of online student communications, a position that didn't exist four years ago.

He and his team introduced The Loop to allow Columbia students to network with each other; it enables the college to track student activities in a systematic way. "One of the things it lets you do is get an idea of what students are talking about," Green says. "That can range from which dorms students prefer to what activities they're interested in."

Twitter From the Top Down

At an administrative level, social networking sites ([Facebook](#), [Flickr](#), [Twitter](#) and [YouTube](#)) are important tools for colleges looking to foster a strong student culture and community.





A student lounge at Columbia College Chicago

Green says that Columbia uses social media for two purposes: student recruitment and retention. Green's focus is on the retention side, which is affected by student perceptions of the school community. Creating campus vitality and a sense of belonging can be a challenge for an urban college like Columbia that is spread across almost two dozen buildings in Chicago's South Loop neighborhood. "We have to work extra hard to find a place that students feel like they're part of a campus," Green says.

The Medium and the Message

Green coordinates newsletters and websites designed to streamline Columbia's message to its student body. One of the main ways the office has fostered a sense of community is through The Loop. The app helps connect prospective students who remain undecided about attending the college. "A lot of people who get accepted to CCC get accepted elsewhere. We hope that people are making friends, and that makes them more likely to come because they have a connection," Green says.

Columbia also uses a customized Facebook app developed by Inigral, a software company. Building consensus on a universal



Columbia College Chicago students in Ferguson Hall

college app was not easy, especially given that Columbia already had a proprietary online student networking service. But in the end a Facebook-based app won out. Green explains it this way: "We can't make them be where we are; we have to be where they are."



A screenshot of Columbia College Chicago's Facebook page



Students in Columbia College Chicago's journalism department

Blackboards Back, and Here to Stay

Columbia is but one example; for years, colleges and universities have been exploring how to leverage the Internet to communicate with students, not always successfully. Earlier this year, the president of the Rhode Island School of Design resigned after students and faculty maligned his “**high-tech experiment**” in communicating largely through social media. Still, such tools seem destined to stay. One of the oldest is the online **Blackboard system**, which has been around for years and continues to evolve.

Charles Whitaker, a professor at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism, says that he uses Blackboard for everything from publishing the class syllabus to assigning grades. “Blackboard is the way virtually every instructor communicates with students,” he says, adding that students also use the online tool for conducting group projects and turning in assignments.

But where earlier versions of Blackboard allowed one-way communication between instructor and student, more recent rollouts incorporate student-to-student communication, which has myriad ramifications in and outside the classroom.

Getting More Out of Google

“This is an important direction for Blackboard to be going, and for us to be supporting,” says Bob Davis, associate director of Academic and Research Technologies at Northwestern.

For the past year, Davis and his team have been working to take Blackboard to the next level. The new application, “**Bboogle**” (pronounced “ba-boogle”), is designed to help instructors utilize **Google’s Apps for Education** offering within the classroom.

Bboogle is an open-source platform that works in tandem with Blackboard. It enables instructors and students to create



Bboogle screenshot showing a Northwestern University course



course-specific websites where they can upload content, track assignments and collaborate on projects. Whether in the form of Bboogle or something yet to be developed, Davis predicts that social networking will continue facilitating student-to-student communication and small team interaction “that may extend across the campus, across schools, and across the world. There’s no doubt that you’ll see that grow over time.”

The Influx of Social Networking

Social networking is critical to colleges that educate online, like Erikson Institute, a Chicago-based school offering advanced degrees in early childhood education. “With 300 students, including 30–40 earning degrees online, we need to create a sense of belonging for students who never set foot in this building,” says Chip Donohue, Erikson’s director of distance learning. “We’re trying to use social media tools more effectively with them.”

Social media’s place in classroom learning is more nebulous. Donohue says today’s students may prefer collaborating online to sitting in a lecture hall, but they remain inherently social. “We do like to gather, but I’m not sure it’s in a computer lab with 30 computers. Do we entice these learners back on campus, or acknowledge they want to learn this way?”



Erikson Institute’s Chicago facility is home to more than 300 students.

Educators’ Shifting Roles

To be sure, the dynamic between instructor and student has been changing for years; and the pervasiveness of the Internet, both in and outside the classroom, has helped shape that evolution. Educators know that the “sage on the stage” model—in which the instructor stands and lectures at a quiet roomful of students—has long been in decline. Part of the reason is the sheer volume of information available to anyone with a

computer, smartphone, or any Internet-ready device. No longer is the role of the instructor strictly to disseminate information, now it's to help students gather and distill that information.

For the past 10 years, Donohue has been studying technology's influence on teacher education. "It takes a lot of time for the content side of the university to rethink pedagogy and delivery of content," he says. "We tend to dismiss what happens online, but if we do we're really missing an opportunity."

Learning From the Multitasking Generation

In a recent series of articles Donohue wrote for *Exchange magazine*, he encourages teachers to get outside their technological comfort zone by using social networking and mobile technology. The participatory culture fostered by the likes of Twitter and Facebook has been readily adopted by youth, but it can be much more difficult for educators to feel comfortable using technology to connect with students. Indeed, technologically speaking, often it's the instructors that need to catch up to their students.

"We use many high-tech digital tools and applications to... manage our personal lives, but we tend to be much farther behind in the ways we use technology professionally to... improve teaching practices," Donohue writes. All of this has a direct impact not only on how students learn, but how learning spaces are designed. So where have shifting learning trends started to affect the physical environment? What about the much-heralded smart classroom?

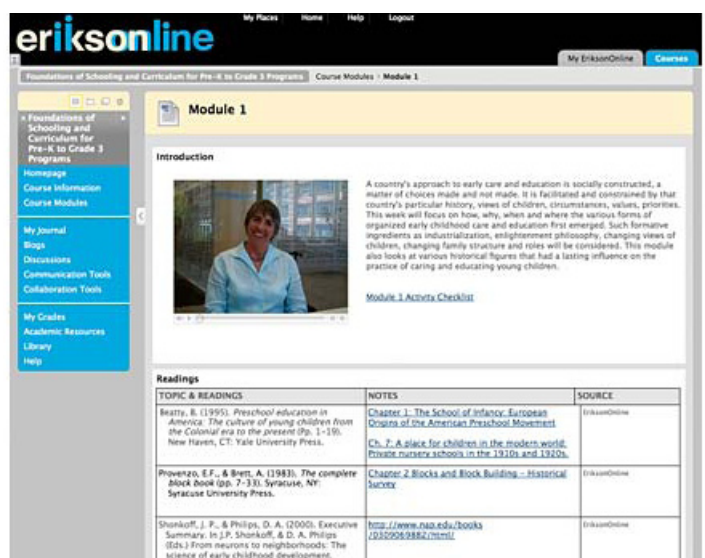
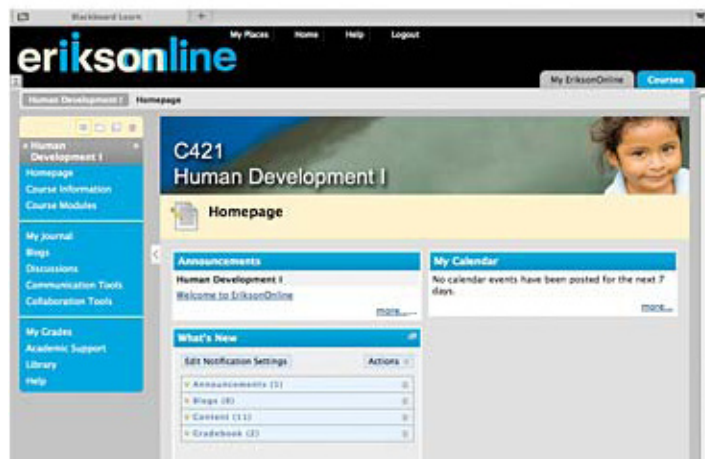
The Virtual Campus

The "smart classroom" is already passé, says Mark Valenti, president and CEO of The Sextant Group Inc., a Pittsburgh-based AV consultant. The latest trends in classroom design are being established following a design concept called **SCALE-UP** in which multimedia classrooms are conceived without a distinct "front" of the room.

Instead, students are seated in groups, each of which is networked with a flat-screen monitor. Students can collaborate in teams, and then share their projects with the class. The lecturer in this setting acts as a facilitator. "It's a different pedagogical approach," Valenti says. "It's not responding to the way students learn, but how they work together."

The Library as Classroom

It's that culture of collaboration that's driving other changes on college campuses, which will no longer comprise a collection of buildings with discrete functions, says Valenti. "Campus



Screenshots showing "eriksonline," Erikson Institute's Blackboard site for students



A view of the Multi-Purpose Room at North Carolina State University's planned James B. Hunt Jr. Library. Valenti cites this project as an example of a next-generation campus library.



A view of the Lakeview Reading Room and the Main Reading Room on Level 2 at North Carolina State University's planned James B. Hunt Jr. Library. Valenti cites this project as an example of a next-generation campus library.

buildings are starting to have more and more similar attributes,” he says. That means the student union starts to look a lot like the library, which in turn starts to look like a classroom building, Valenti says.

Part of the reason for this shift is the fact that technology has become both portable and affordable. “The learning setting has to be available where the students are going to land,” Valenti says. Therefore, the emphasis will be less on technology-specific building typologies, and more about creating spaces where students are likely to congregate to study. Erikson’s Donohue agrees: “I don’t think we’ll see the demise of academic libraries, but we will see academic libraries become a different animal.”

Converging on Campus

Valenti also predicts that an “organizational convergence” is starting to occur between libraries and IT departments. As modes of research continue to tip toward digital delivery methods, librarians have started to embrace a new role in providing research assistance across multiple types of media. As these two discrete roles begin to blur, Valenti says this convergence eventually will affect everything from facilities to staffing.

Tools like Blackboard are only the tip of the iceberg, according to Northwestern University professor Charles Whitaker. “It’s the stepping stone to not conducting any classes with students in classrooms,” says Whitaker, who predicts that someday most classes will be conducted online with students “sitting in their rooms in their pajamas, Skype-ing in.”

Will online learning becomes so ubiquitous that physical learning spaces become obsolete? Probably not entirely. As Bob Davis, Northwestern’s associate director of Academic

and Research Technologies, puts it, “schools like us are a little conservative and traditional; we value the on-campus experience.”

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Download “[Gensler’s Education Roundtable Survey](#)” (PDF) and learn more about Gensler’s education design perspectives at the GenslerOn blog, which includes posts from story author Michael Hanley.

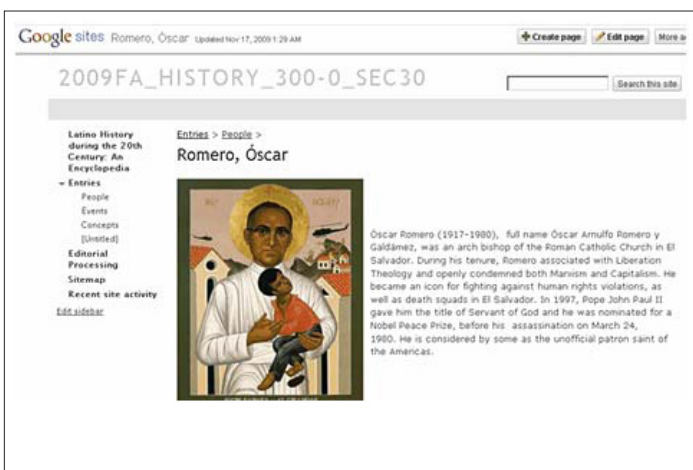
Further Reading

“[More Professors Give Out Hand-Held Devices to Monitor Students and Engage Them](#),” by Jacques Steinberg, *The New York Times*

“[What’s in your toolbox? New technology tools for EC professionals—Part 1](#),” by Chip Donohue, *Exchange* magazine

“[There’s an app for \(almost\) everything—New technology tools for EC professionals—Part 2](#),” by Chip Donohue, *Exchange* magazine

“[Are iPads, smartphones and the Mobile Web rewiring the way we think?](#),” by Gregory M. Lamb, *Christian Science Monitor*



Boogle screenshot showing a Northwestern University course