

The Emerging Scholars Project at Hazel Green High School

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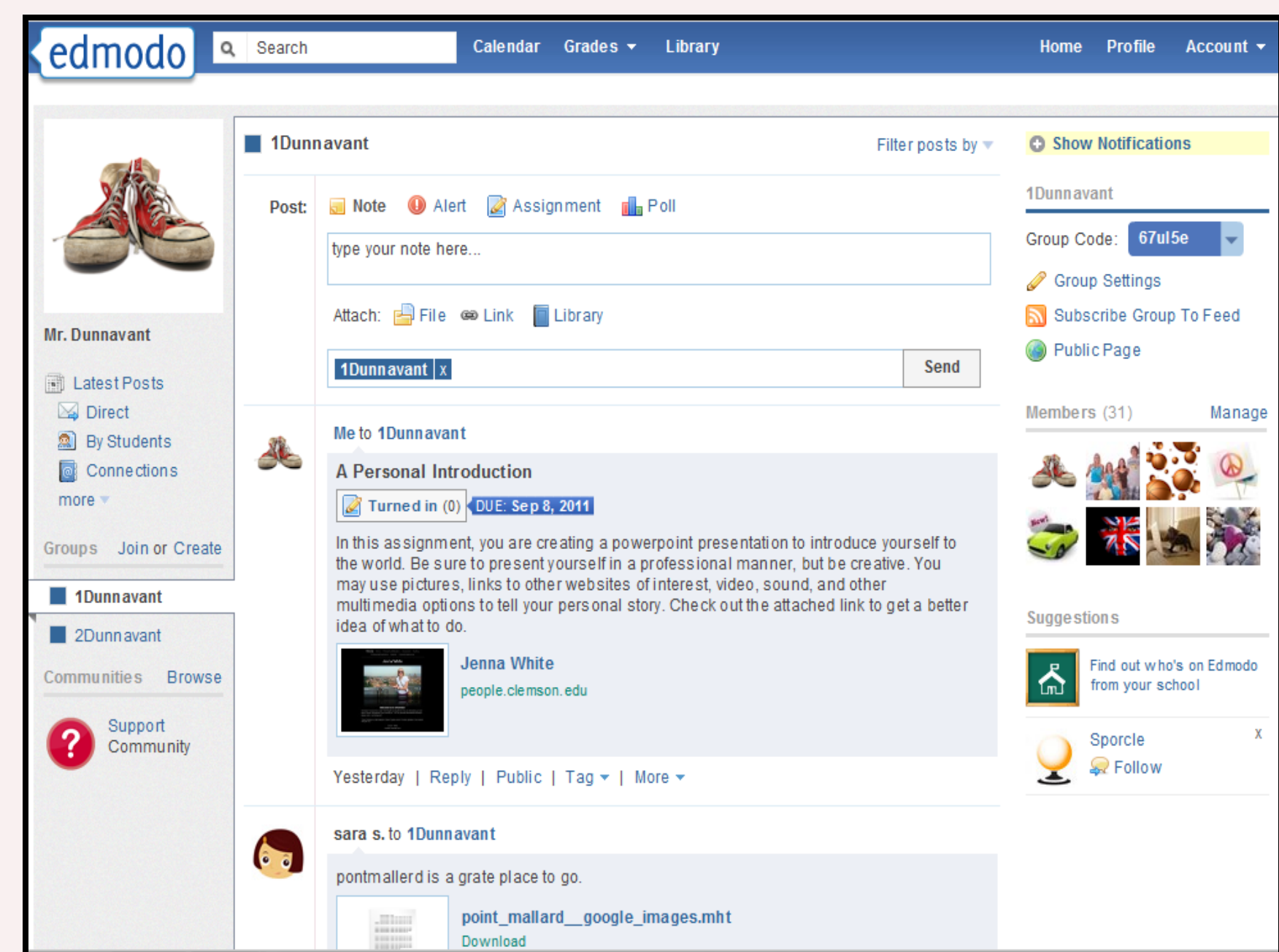
ABOVE: The Lockheed Martin Corporation donated 100 laptop computers for the ninth-grade students at Hazel Green High School to use throughout the 2011 Fall Semester for the Emerging Scholars Program.

ABSTRACT

Emerging Scholars utilizes new media technology (from Flip cameras to Web 2.0) to help students become experts in a field of their choice. Sharing pedagogical and technical knowledge, Hazel Green High School teachers and UAHuntsville professors engage ninth-grade readers and writers in self-directed, semester long research projects. Emerging Scholars has two main goals: 1) Train teachers to effectively use new media technologies in their classrooms, and 2) Improve students' literacy skills through the use of digital resources. By challenging the students to demonstrate expertise in their chosen topic through the collaborative production complex and lengthy texts using digital resources, Emerging Scholars works to improve reading and writing, increase critical thinking, and foster the development of skills related to inquiry, research, and presentation. In our pilot program, our experimental group's net improvement in reading proficiency was 68% compared to the control group, which improved by 11%. As a result of this increase, Hazel Green invited us to increase the number of participants from 15 to 160, which represents the entire ninth-grade class. In light of our pilot program's success, it is our hypothesis that this program will drastically improve students' reading and writing skills.

METHODOLOGY

The creation and implementation of Emerging Scholars was guided by the tenets of action research, which dictates that all research participants have a voice in research and results. In other words, action research describes both the theory and method of academic inquiry that works to benefit all participants involved in the research project. In this way, action research philosophically opposes "traditional" and positivist research methods that depend on a detached and distant researcher observing and testing subjects in order to determine "truths" about their behavior. Action research, instead, relies on collaboration between the researcher and research participant to produce knowledge and skills that are of use to both the researcher and research participant. When applied specifically to educators, action research involves systematic analysis of classroom practice, student learning, and instructor goals in order to improve curricula, projects, and student/instructor experience. We determined that the pedagogical approach best suited to action research – that which could facilitate all participants' goals – was one that engaged the students in self-directed, digitally mediated projects.



ABOVE: A screenshot of Jeff Dunnivant's classroom homepage on EdModo where students can post information, photographs, videos, and links to resources related to their chosen field of study.

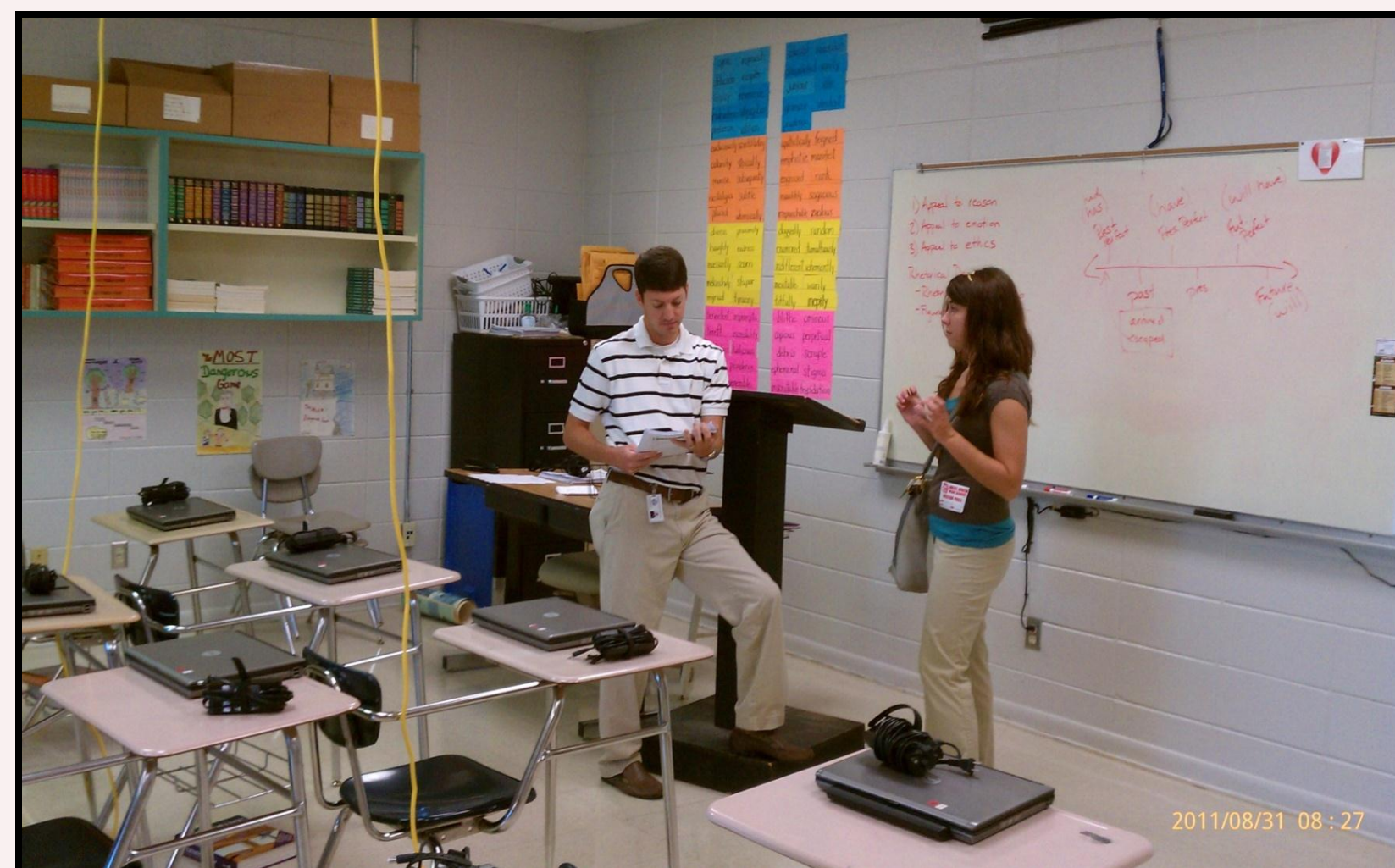
After choosing an appropriate platform, we developed a day-long training session for the three participating ninth-grade English teachers from Hazel Green High School. During the teacher training, we discussed the methodology undergirding the construction of the Emerging Scholars project, and we asked each teacher to share with us their goals for the upcoming 2011 Fall Semester. Based on the participating teachers' goals for the semester and our reasons for conducting the research project, we outlined as a group a tentative pacing guide for the teachers and students to follow throughout the Emerging Scholars project. In order for the participating teachers to obtain first-hand experience with EdModo, we had the teachers sign-on to EdModo as students, and we then guided the teachers through the activities listed on the pacing guide that their students would be completing during the upcoming semester as part of their research project for Emerging Scholars. Accordingly, the teachers uploaded images, embedded videos, and shared links on the EdModo homepage for the training session. To conclude the teacher training, we determined that we would assess the progress of the Emerging Scholars project through the use of pre- and post-Likert scale surveys and through the continuous monitoring of the participants' goals through weekly observations and frequent interviews with participants.

IMPLEMENTATION

To begin the semester, we spent the first two class meetings with the Emerging Scholars' students soliciting the students' opinions about their research interest and the possibilities for multi-media presentations. We introduced EdModo to the participating students and helped students create their individual student profiles. While the students explored the capabilities of EdModo, the students simultaneously brainstormed what they projected they would be able to accomplish during the semester and what they would present as their final project. Before the end of day two, students began intuitively posting information, images, and links related to potential topics of interest.

PREPARATION

To begin the formal creation of the Emerging Scholars project, we first chose a socially-networked platform where students could create individual profiles, store their research, and analyze their classmates work. Similar to the format of FaceBook, EdModo provides students with a space to post comments, upload documents or other forms of media, and comment on their peers' posts. In addition, EdModo supplies every student with an individual profile wherein students are equipped with a personal library to organize their research, a calendar to keep track of important deadlines, and a personal "wall" to view the history of their own posts as well as the suggestions made by their peers. Should the teachers choose to utilize the "assignments" function on EdModo, students would also be able to check their grades posted in a private section within their student profiles.



ABOVE: Elizabeth Cole discusses with Jeff Dunnivant, one of the participating English teachers at Hazel Green High School, the procedure for helping students create individual student profiles on EdModo.



LEFT: Ninth-grade students in Sherry Bastin's class log on to EdModo for the first time at Hazel Green High School. For the initial log on, every student creates a student profile on EdModo which enables them to store online resources in a personal library, collaborate on research projects with their peers, and post findings on the progress they have made in the research on their chosen field of study.

THE "EMERGING SCHOLARS" PROCESS

Throughout the 2011 Fall Semester, the three participating ninth-grade English teachers at Hazel Green High School will spend approximately two hours per week working with their students on EdModo. During these two hours, students will be provided the opportunity to conduct research on their chosen field of study, work on the components of their research project, and participate in peer review. Students will be provided the opportunity to work at their own pace; therefore, students will be able to direct the progress of their research. On any given day, different students might simultaneously be learning new ways to use images, tag information, or avoid sites with too much advertising. Although students will be provided the freedom to direct their own learning, the teacher may choose to conduct a mini-lesson for the entire class based on students' demonstration of progress in the research process and the results of student-led discussions. The content of mini-lessons could include a critical assessment of web-based information, an explanation of copyright and fair use laws, or an analysis of potential presentation formats and techniques. When students are not on EdModo, the Emerging Scholars' students will participate in the traditional classroom environment as set-up by their teacher. By the end of the semester, students participating in Emerging Scholars project will compile their research on their chosen field of study and present their findings to the students, faculty, and staff of Hazel Green High School in the most effective format for their topic. To conclude the semester, students will complete a post-Likert scale survey that inquires into students' level of engagement with reading and writing as well as students' perceptions of technology use in school. In addition, the ninth-grade students at Madison County High School will also complete the pre- and post-Likert scale surveys in order for the results to be compared with the student responses from Hazel Green High School.

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