The Emerging Scholars Project at Hazel Green High School

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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 of 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—the which could facilitate all participants’ goals—was one that engaged the students in self-directed, digitally mediated projects.

IMPLEMENTATION
To begin the seminar, 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.

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 underlying 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 then we guided the participating 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 participating students’ goals through weekly observations and frequent interviews with participants.

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