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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Digital Assignments
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Teaching Toolbox: Digital Assignments by Paige Normand

As a coordinator for a program that supports digital literacy on campus, I know how invested JMU faculty are in giving their students opportunities to develop digital production skills. If you're interested in creating a digital assignment for your course, JMU offers several resources: Innovation Services' [Programs and Workshops](#), the CFI's [Teaching Programs](#), as well as [The Digital Humanities and Social Sciences Institute](#).

This toolbox, however, describes four common hurdles to integrating digital assignments and strategies faculty can use to address them. This list is from [DigiComm](#), my program that embeds trained peer tutors into classes where faculty are piloting digital assignments and that offers consultations for any student on campus working on a digital project. Now in our third year of operation, DigiComm tutors have provided semester-long support to students in 60 courses across campus and conducted hundreds of consultations. From the tutors' own in-class experiences, one-on-one tutoring sessions, focus-group interviews with other students, and experiences working in digital communication across campus, they have a unique perspective on the "behind the scenes" issues that students face that might be invisible to faculty.

Here are four common hurdles, opportunities, and JMU examples for faculty to consider when incorporating digital assignments into their curriculum:

1. Value of Digital Literacy

Hurdle: Students don't understand the value the digital assignment brings to the course, the discipline, or their own skill development.

Opportunity: Capitalize on the public nature of online projects by designing the assignment for an external audience. DigiComm's most successful faculty partners have addressed authentic audiences such as future employers, community organizations, faculty or classes in other disciplines, or other relevant stakeholders.

Example: JMU engineering students created a [digital story](#) to explain their wastewater proposal to community stakeholders; a WRTC faculty member regularly partners with community organization, such as the [Lucy Simms Exhibit](#); a Communication Studies faculty invited relevant JMU stakeholders from the Madison Collaborative to his students' presentations of their digital stories on topics such as "[how do we help our youngest children thrive?](#)"

2. Knowledge of Digital Tool

Hurdle: Faculty are not familiar enough with the digital tool to accurately assess their students' work or understand the constraints or abilities of the digital production tool.

Opportunity: Faculty can produce the digital assignment in advance to more accurately assess their students' work, create more meaningful benchmarks and resources, and model a growth mindset toward developing digital skills.

Example: One faculty partner produced her own digital storytelling project in preparation for assigning it to the class. She was then able to share the various stages of her work with her students to illustrate the common pitfalls academics make when transitioning to a more public platform: she wrote far too much text, she used discipline-specific language rather than writing for a general audience, and she realized how difficult it was to find meaningful images to supplement her work.

3. **Composition Process**

Hurdle: Faculty's perception of students as "digital natives" can lead them to misrepresent the complexity of digital production or overestimate students' fluency with digital production tools. Students' anxiety about their aptitude and confusion about their process may impede their digital skill development.

Opportunity: Faculty can design specific rubrics and benchmarks based on learning objectives and identify priorities for creation. Given the versatility of digital composition, it is also helpful when faculty set regular deadlines to allow students to share their work and receive feedback. Students are then better able to calibrate faculty's expectations.

Examples: Compared to traditional papers, digital assignments often add a level of complexity, creativity, and new skill development in addition to demonstrating content mastery. We've seen the most success when faculty are clear in their rubrics about how much they value the elements of digital composition (creativity, usability, interaction, copyright considerations, design principles, etc.) in addition to the mastery of the course content. See a more [in-depth analysis](#) of rubric elements for professional portfolios.

4. **Peer Feedback**

Hurdle: To maintain their image as tech-savvy, students seem less likely to share questions or concerns with their faculty member about a digital assignment than they are with more traditional academic assignments.

Opportunity: Give students time in class to collaborate and discuss their process and drafts. DigiComm encourages faculty to offer regular opportunities in class for students to showcase drafts of their work, get feedback from their peers, describe their own process, and share

resources.

Example: One DigiComm tutor created a “[Bucket List](#)” for students to stay on track and follow suggested deadlines, including attending a workshop on campus for designing infographics and booking two consultations by the middle of the semester. This structure emphasized the learning process and opportunities for feedback for the students rather than focusing on the evaluation of the final product.

Want to learn more about [DigiComm](#)?

- Hear what our faculty partners have had to say about the [DigiComm Media Fellows](#).
- Learn more about the [Media Fellows program](#) and apply to be a partner for Fall 2017.
- Learn more about [faculty resources](#) that DigiComm offers.
- Check out DigiComm’s tutorials on [YouTube](#) and our latest tips and advice on [Facebook](#).
- Encourage your students to [book a consultation](#) to work with a DigiComm tutor.

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