

Success Story

Teaching the Classics Using 21st Century Pedagogy

At Moss Point High School on Mississippi's Gulf Coast, Lewis Sims' ninth-grade English classroom is full of energy and excitement as students prepare to present a project to another class. Their project—a movie trailer that they wrote and produced for the Harper Lee novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*—was the result of 21st century pedagogy designed to help them understand the novel's primary themes and concepts.

The movie trailer was Sims' way of accomplishing the difficult task of getting students to read classic literature. "Students want instant gratification," he explains. "Why should they read a book when they can go online and find the plot summary and theme analysis? That's hard to overcome. As a teacher, I have to show them that their minds are the best source of imagination. You can facilitate learning with other things, but there's nothing like your own brain—it's the best television, the best Internet."


Sims is a longtime teacher, football coach, and alumnus of Moss Point High School, which serves more than 1000 students. After much of Moss Point was flooded or destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, the school received a Cisco® grant as part of the 21st Century Schools Initiative (21S).

Adding a Personal Touch to an Unconventional Project

"Textbooks and lectures aren't always relevant teaching tools anymore," says Sims. Noting the popularity of theme channels such as The Learning Channel and The History Channel, he adds, "They take information and facts and bring them to life in a way that can have a much deeper impact on the student."

Sims integrated technology and learner-centric pedagogical approaches into lessons about *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the classic novel about racial injustice and the loss of childhood innocence. After his students read the novel and answered essay questions, Sims began to introduce 21st century pedagogy. "I let the kids decide what to do next," he explains. "We brainstormed and they decided to make a movie trailer that showed the book's main concepts. I asked them to think about ways to personalize it and make it special to Moss Point."

With a student population composed of more than 70 percent African-Americans, the school's demographics are unique—a fact not lost on Sims' students. "They thought it would be interesting to flip the script and have the minority be in the majority for the movie trailer."



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Moss Point
English Teacher

The students spent two class days a week for the next month working on the script. The project capitalized on each student's individual talents and skills; some students were scriptwriters, some were actors, and others directed the filming and editing of the video. Students created an interactive website—a wiki—that allowed them to develop and edit the script as a team. "When I read the script, I knew immediately that they firmly grasped the novel's themes," Sims says. "In fact, they actually amplified the concepts that we talked about."

Getting Students to Participate in Authentic Learning

In addition to reinforcing the book's main concepts, the project helped Sims' students learn and practice a variety of practical skills. For example, they learned the importance of cooperation in a collaborative situation, the value of compromise, and the art of prioritization. "Everybody had different ideas and tastes, but in the end, a movie trailer is only a few minutes long," he notes. "You have to prioritize messages, and you have to give and take with your peers."

Students learned another real-world lesson: how to evaluate themselves and others. Sims actively involved them in the grading process, working with them to develop a scale for evaluating the final product, and helping them understand how to perform peer evaluations. "They should be able to provide and receive constructive criticism without anyone's feelings getting hurt," he says. "You can't just be a problem finder—you have to be a problem solver. Students have to be able to talk to one another openly and understand that it's okay to criticize constructively."

Using Technology to Facilitate Learning

Sims has at his disposal a number of technologies, such as interactive whiteboards, data projectors, and software applications for creating movies and multimedia presentations, which allow students to learn by teaching their classmates. "Technology lets me expose my students to new ways of learning, where they become the teacher and I become the facilitator," explains Sims. "I give them competencies and objectives, tell them what they need to learn, and encourage them to think of different ways to learn."

An example is the class presentation of the *To Kill a Mockingbird* trailer. "When they presented the trailer to other classes, those kids were able to pick up on the themes. For students who hadn't read the book, it piqued their interest," he says. "For my students, presenting and explaining the book to others was a very powerful learning experience."

"Student- and technology-centric pedagogy is a way of involving all students in learning," says Sims. He uses a metaphor to describe the process: "If you can get the herd headed in the right direction, stragglers will join the herd with a little nudging and prodding," he explains. "Sometimes you find that those who were the most resistant are leading the rest of the pack."

"If you give them the guidelines, the tools, and the technology, you'll be surprised at what they do and how well they learn," Sims concludes. "Students want to make things their own. They want to personalize it with colors or graphics or sounds. By providing these opportunities, you hook them. Because once they own it, they've learned it."

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