

## *Technology and Teaching: Beyond the Written Word*

**James Lochtefeld, Chair, Professor of Religion, Carthage College; Panelists: Marjorie Williams, Director, Education and Public Programs, Cleveland Art Museum; Paul Nietupski, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, John Carroll University**

### **Introduction**

**James Lochtefeld**  
**Carthage College**

The basic premise behind this panel is this: most ASIANetwork members teach at small colleges, where our primary task is to teach students. This often brings considerable excitement and delight, but it also takes our time, energy, and commitment. Given these heavy demands, particularly on faculty time, any technology that can help faculty work more efficiently deserves serious consideration.

All three of the panel members spoke to the use of technology to promote more effective teaching. I opened with the most general presentation, by talking about the course planning software known as Blackboard. Paul Nietupski described more specific uses of technology in his Asian religions classes. Marjorie Williams, the Director of Education at the Cleveland Museum of Art, finished by talking about the possibilities for using art images in teaching, both from online sources and from CD Rom.

**Blackboard: Course Planning Software.** I began to use Blackboard for one simple reason: Carthage had switched to a new e-mail system on which I could not e-mail lists for my classes, and Blackboard was the only way to do this. To tell the truth, I would've used whatever platform the IT folks at Carthage had seen fit to endorse. By and large, I am a reluctant acolyte to technology—I don't have a lot of electronic toys—but anything that will help me teach better, I give it my fullest consideration.

Blackboard is an on-line course planning shell. Access is by user name and password, so it is a secure site. The initial screen is a "welcome" page, which lists the courses in which one is enrolled (as a student or instructor), as well as a few additional functions (sending e-mail, checking grades, and updating personal information). The most important features come when one clicks on one of the courses. This brings up a sub-page devoted completely to that course, on the left side of which is a column with a set of various toolbars: Announcements, Course Information, Course Documents (online readings), Assignments, Books, Communication (e-mail addresses and the class roster), Virtual Classroom (an "instant messenger" type arrangement), an online Discussion Board, Groups, External Links (URLs for other websites), and Tools (especially the Digital Drop Box).

The faculty version of this page is almost identical, except that at the bottom of the buttons is one titled "Control Panel." Clicking on this brings up an item by item menu for

the subject areas noted above, but also includes an Online Grade book, Course Utilities, and Course Statistics (which gives data about student use). The other difference is that when one clicks on one of the headings in the control panel (e.g., "Announcements") one finds the option for changing the offerings there.

One of the great benefits is that the process of adding something—an announcement, a class reading, a gradebook item—is completely uniform for each item. Consequently, the learning curve is very shallow—basically, anyone who can follow a sequential menu and simple directions can be using this in no time (in some ways, it is like the difference between MS-Dos and Windows—both run the computer, but the latter is far simpler for ordinary people to get up and running). This allows people with little or limited technical expertise to post, update, and remove their class offerings from the web.

I'm not a complete convert (and probably never will be). Since all of my courses are already online on the Carthage server—along with text, translation, and photo pages—I have not moved them to Blackboard, since if we changed vendors, I would have to change these as well. I did put the URLs to my course pages in the External Links section, so that students could get there more easily. Here are also plenty of features that I do not use, and probably never will: the calendar and the address book (I prefer the old-fashioned versions here), the virtual classroom (I don't mind a whole room of people trying to talk, but I don't want to do this on a screen), and online quizzes and exams (I am deeply suspicious of students, and want to watch them take these in person). There are also certain tasks that I will only do at work, where the internet connection is faster than my connection at home. My basic attitude toward technology is pragmatic—I want it to make my life easier, and if it does, I will use it.

Still, there are many features about this that I really like. One is that it is available from any internet connection. Once the class lists are set, it is easy to communicate with students—whether to send a message to the whole class, to student groups, or to selected students. The Digital Drop Box provides secure submission for papers, instant availability, and the opportunity to do paperless editing. I download the papers from the Digital Drop Box, read and comment on them (using the Reviewing Feature on Microsoft Word), and then send them back to the students electronically, keeping a copy on my hard drive. When students submit revised papers, I already have a copy of their drafts for comparison. The Online Gradebook

allows students to check their grades whenever they want, as well as giving me the security of having my grade records in another place. Finally, the course statistics allow me to see who has actually been using these resources.

I am also thinking about new ways to use this. I have already used the Discussion Board in my introductory Religion classes, to give students the chance for unstructured, out-of-class discussion. For several years I've had small groups of students lead discussion in class on the day's reading, and I don't see any reason (beyond the logistics of thinking about how to set it up) why I couldn't move these group discussions to the Discussion Board, and have the groups run them after class, so that the discussion could reinforce class learning. Finally, in Spring 2003 I am scheduled to teach a special section of Heritage, a cultural studies class, in which some of the in-class "seat time" will be replaced by electronic discussion. I've never done anything like this before, but I'm more than willing to try.

### **Methods for Research and Teaching Asian Ideologies and Material Cultures**

**Paul Nietupski, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, John Carroll University**

*Introduction.* Two key challenges face Western teachers of Asian studies. The first challenge is to make one's own study of Asia accessible and understandable to students, colleagues, and curricula by skillful delivery of information and interaction in and out of the classroom. The second challenge is to continue with new research in one's field, and whenever possible, to make this new research relevant to one's classes and campus curricula. Sounds easy—teaching and research. The details and combinations of these two vary in different institutions, whether in small liberal arts colleges or large research institutions. Still, in all cases, scholars of Asian studies working in Western colleges and universities face the problem of striking a balance between the demands of teaching and research, a problem addressed in the present project which employs both an interdisciplinary method and modern computer technology.<sup>1</sup>

This project began with text research in the history of medieval Indian Buddhist and Hindu institutions. Given that the Indian Buddhist Sanskrit texts are of uncertain provenance, the project turned to archeological and art historical materials to help place the texts in Indian history. Looking for relevant data outside of texts may seem obvious, but such investigation is still not commonly in use. This is surprising, given the proliferation of medieval Indian art throughout Asia which evidences a highly developed social, political, economic and religious culture. With the study of art objects as historical tools, the project attempts to verify or corroborate some specifics of Buddhist life in medieval India.

As for teaching, our team brought this research methodology into college level courses on Indian

Buddhism and Hinduism. Over a period of three years, the chronology of Indian art served as a corroborating outline for introductory undergraduate courses in Indian religions. That is, art history was used as a method for understanding the chronology of religious and social histories. Over several years the chief academic and specific object resources for this project came from the Cleveland Museum of Art. Moreover, study with the museum's curators in and out of formal classes held at the CMA and active programming with the museum's educators expanded this project from classrooms to a wider community audience.<sup>2</sup>



Nataraja, Shiva as the King of Dance  
South India, Medieval Period, Chola Dynasty, 11th century  
Purchased from the J.H. Wade Fund 1930.331  
*Photo Courtesy of Marjorie Williams, The Cleveland Museum of Art*

*Rationale.* This teaching and research agenda began with the Indian idea that a passionate attitude toward life is a crucial component of a life oriented toward liberation. Here, esthetics (and the related Indian ideas of *rasa* and *bhava*) are explained as how one understands and experiences the world and how one expresses oneself in the world. Moreover, and here very briefly, for devout medieval Indian Hindus and Buddhists, human experience is where religious practice takes place. Paradoxically, in this type of religious practice and from this philosophical perspective, one proceeds on the path to liberation through intense engagement with the world. In this culture, there was no prohibition about expressing these ideas in material media. On the contrary, Indians clearly felt that their religions encouraged passionate expression in literature and the arts. Thus, there is an important connection between Indian ideology and material culture and, more generally, between religion and art. In other words, there are "... metaphysical foundations which underlie much Indian [art and] sculpture."<sup>3</sup> In Indian art it is not the appearance, but the significance of objects, human or otherwise, that is sought for ... it is not the object, but a concept that stands before us."<sup>4</sup> There is then a solid rationale for teaching ideologies, philosophies, histories, and societies with or at the same time as teaching material cultures.