Can I Really Make that Great Assignment Work on Canvas?

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Preparing a face-to-face class for online delivery can be challenging. Content and assignments must be transformed to adapt to the demands and opportunities of virtual teaching and learning.

When my department decided to try to make it possible to complete our major requirements online, I took on the challenge of adapting our gateway course for delivery through Canvas. One of the stated learning objectives of the class – and a learning outcome identified by the National Communication Association for all Communication Studies majors – is to introduce students to the discipline's history. In the face to face class, I accomplish this through a "talk show" assignment. Students are assigned to research and prepare to role-play a person from the history of Communication. On performance day, I host a "talk show" on which the various personalities, role played by students, are guests. Through the assignment, students engage with the discipline's history, and they are able to see how key ideas that are central to Communication have evolved over time. This assignment has always been an effective, interactive, and engaging way to meet this learning outcome, and I was concerned about how I would accomplish the same goal as effectively online.

Using some of Canvas's most basic tools, I was able to find a solution to this challenge through the "Virtual History of Communication Timeline." As a class, we created a virtual timeline populated by student-created videos about key figures in Communication. Each student researched one person, created and uploaded a video about that person, and then travelled through time, watching and interacting with personalities from throughout the history of the discipline. Although this assignment was developed for a small, introductory-level Communication class, it could easily be adapted to other disciplines.

Here are the steps I followed to implement this assignment:

1. Before the beginning of the semester, I set up the assignment by creating a "History of Communication Timeline" in Canvas Discussions. I set up a discussion thread for each of the chosen figures from the history of communication (see screenshot). I even provided a sample video of one personality.
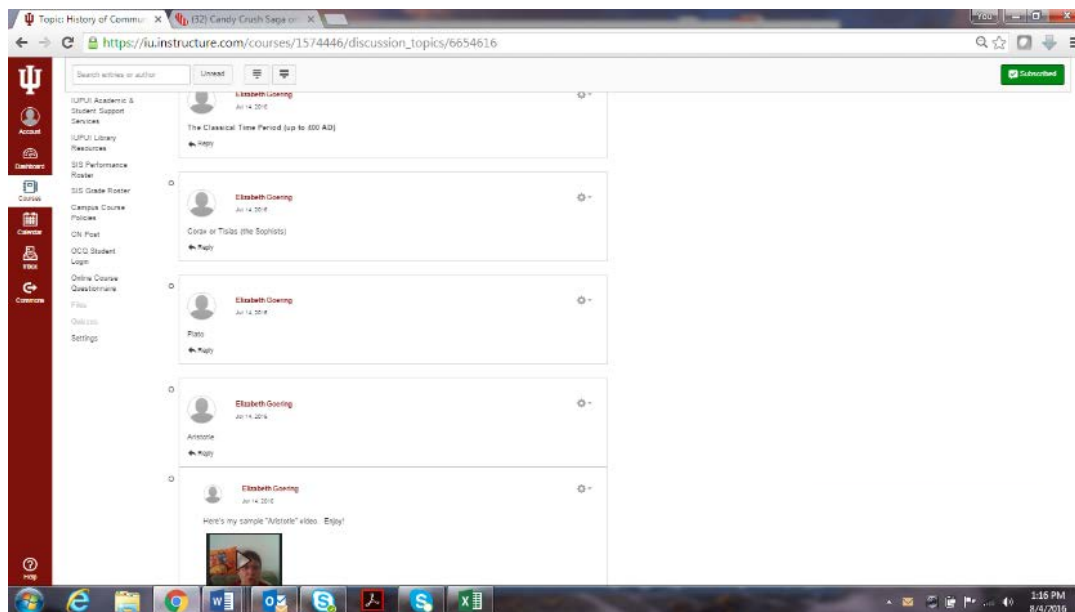
2. The next step in the process was to assign each student a historical figure to research and role play for the assignment. As part of the assignment, I provided a link to a tutorial for recording/uploading media in Canvas (https://community.canvaslms.com/docs/DOC-1867).
3. By the specified due date, students were asked to upload their videos. Several of the students role-played their assigned person. One solicited the assistance of a friend and conducted an interview with his communication scholar. Others gave speeches about their person.
4. Students then had 1 week to watch the videos posted by their classmates and to engage in online discussion with the various personalities, role-played by their classmates. Students were encouraged to watch all of the videos, and they were required to engage in substantive discussion with at least 5 of them.

By using basic Canvas tools, the class was able to create its own virtual timeline and to travel through it to learn the history of the discipline in an interactive and memorable manner.