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E: Face -- Integrating Electronic Discussion Postings with Face-2-face Teaching

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By way of introduction, Professor Kumar explained that the impetus for developing the use of electronic postings was to maximize the seminar format for both teacher and student. He briefly reviewed the types of seminar formats encountered at his university. He noted that typically, they involve a student presenting topics or a paper and posing questions for discussion.

Professor Kumar then outlined the shortcomings of this traditional face-to-face seminar format under specific conditions, for example, uneven student presentations. He identified these as problems stemming from the traditional seminar format and his school's nationally diverse student body, and offered a process chart leading from these problems to their respective outcomes, especially for good students.

Professor Kumar next discussed various ways of integrating electronic postings into the traditional seminar format. He enumerated the benefits of using electronic postings prior to face-to-face teaching and characterized them as ways to fix the problems of the traditional format. He concluded that the strengths of this alternative format (the traditional face-to-face plus electronic postings) are that seminars are less likely to turn into mini-lectures, and consequently, the learning experience is enhanced. Professor Kumar also contrasted the above-described benefits with the "debts" of this use of electronic postings.

Following his presentation, Professor Kumar detailed his experience of using electronic postings in this way. He illustrated with examples from his seminar's bulletin board. In particular, he demonstrated the kinds of initial queries he poses to students, and how he scaffolded their

responses. He explained that the process intends for students to build their critical thinking skills.

Similarly, Professor Kumar described how he uses students' electronic postings in class. For example, he said, he often reiterates or otherwise draws from points that students have made therein. He noted that his use of electronic postings differs depending on the class. In any case, he emphasized, there must be variety in the tasks assigned to students week-to-week for electronic postings to engage the students. Professor Kumar concluded that electronic postings enhance the content of class and/or the discussion of various topics by providing an avenue for introducing additional sources of information and knowledge. His students are nationally diverse, Professor Kumar explained, so they have much to contribute in this respect.

Professor Kumar then presented a second project, namely, a web-based research "map" for the writing of baccalaureate, masters and doctoral theses. Professor Kumar explained that the map intends to show how the different elements of a research project work together to form a unified process; for example, how to get from a topic of interest to a workable research question. Professor Kumar reasoned that the research and writing process is an intricate one deserving of such a guide. He noted that it is designed for self-study since there is no formal structure to support students through the thesis requirement.

Professor Kumar further explained that the research map works in conjunction with a research process web site, which expands upon the map. He demonstrated how the map can be used as an index to the material contained at the site; or alternatively, the material may be perused from top to bottom as in a traditional document. By clicking on different parts of the map, students can access descriptions of the corresponding research components in the form of Power Point slides.

Professor Kumar said that he has used the research map as a teaching tool for the last two years. Although difficult to quantify, he said it has had a positive impact. For instance, Professor Kumar noted that due to the lack of structure for the final research project, students tended to write descriptive (as opposed to analytical) theses. He said that their work is stronger in terms of the individual research components. However, he would still like to refine the digital

environment so as to improve the learner's ability to integrate the stages and view the process as a recursive one. Professor Kumar concluded that there is therefore still some need for face-to-face instruction in the research and writing process.

With respect to the usefulness of such a resource to the writing program at Columbia, Professor Kumar suggested that it offers students the opportunity to collaborate with each other through the research/writing process. At the very least, he added, it provides a measure of informal support, which graduate students especially need. Thus, it has a potential audience that is quite wide. Professor Kumar offered some evidence of this, noting that the number of students registering for access to the map has grown each year since its introduction, and currently stands at about 400.