

Saying Yes to Technology

TC alumnus Frank Moretti is a worldwide force in digital education

From curricula by Margaret Crocco to the Global Classroom at Jeffrey Sachs' Earth Institute, much "new media" in Morningside Heights and beyond comes courtesy of Frank Moretti and his Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning (CCNMTL).

The Center was dreamed up by Moretti (who holds an appointment at TC as Professor of Communications) and his former TC thesis advisor, Robbie McClintock, and launched in 1999 by Moretti and Maurice Matiz. Housed on Columbia's Morningside campus in Butler Library and Lewisohn Hall, as well as at the 168th Street medical center, CCNMTL employs 40 full-time people. It serves all 18 schools within the university and over 3,000 individual faculty members.

"We're information consultants who promote the purposeful use of technology in education," says Moretti, a bearded ex-teacher of high school Greek, Latin and philosophy who looks like a milder Ernest Hemingway.

The Center builds or partners on technologies like CourseWorks, an online course management system that supports 6,000 offices of instruction. It helps organizations inside and outside Columbia organize their information. And it works with individual faculty, often serving as co-primary investigators and grant recipients. These collaborations, which emphasize research, classroom applications and helping underprivileged communities, have included the Earth Institute's Global Classroom, which enables leading thinkers and students around the world to hold real-time discussions on problems of sustainable development; Masivukeni, a program that enables health clinics in Cape Town, South Africa, to assist people with HIV in adhering to antiretroviral therapy; Engaging Digital Tibet, which enhances the teaching and learning of Tibetan material history; and The Southside Chicago Documentation Project, a web-based environment that centers on a digitized collection of the *South Street Journal*, a once-powerful local newspaper.



TECH SAVVY, but with a philosopher's outlook.

At TC, CCNMTL has worked with psychologist Herbert Ginsburg to develop VITAL, a tool that archives video and embeds it, footnote-style, in text, so that academic papers become multimedia presentations. CCNMTL was also the lead partner with WGBH Public Television in Boston in creating "Vietnam Online," a digital library anchored by footage from the station's landmark 1980s document-

ary, *Vietnam: A Television Experience*. Moretti engaged faculty from around the College—including Crocco and William Gaudelli, who produced their "Vietnam Now" curriculum. And CCNMTL is part of a big grant TC received in October to create a new urban teacher residency program.

How did a former humanities guy become a worldwide force in digital technology?

"Meeting Robbie was the key," says Moretti, who, as a history doctoral student at TC in 1969, secured McClintock as his advisor and Lawrence Cremin and Maxine Greene on his dissertation committee. "He had a room-sized word processor that had 256K memory and giant floppies. He and I taught human communications, about the emergence of printing and the formation of nation states. We looked at what was going on around us with computers, and we said, Jeez, we're living in another great revolution."

Later, as Associate Headmaster of Dalton, a private school in Manhattan, Moretti fielded a \$4 million gift to the school from the Tishman realty family to experiment with technology. "Robbie went on leave to work with me, and we produced something that *Time* featured in a story on the new world of learning. After that, McKinsey [the consulting organization] used us to instruct CEOs, and it built from there."

Ultimately, Moretti retains a philosopher's perspective. "Twitter, Facebook—who ever thought capitalism would get to the point where the product is created by the consumer?" He laughs uproariously. "Marx would have loved it!" 🍷