

# Faculty Showcase '08

Sponsored by Academic Technology at Simmons College



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## Goals

In this blended course, students:

- Gain meaningful insight into the lives of people with disabilities through the online investigation of authentic life-changing stories
- Learn to accommodate individuals with disabilities in community-based settings by understanding and using cutting-edge research, resources and tools
- Deepen their learning through increased opportunities to collaborate with peers and with diverse assistive technology users from around the world



## Learning Without Limits

### Project Overview

After developing more sophisticated design skills during last summer's Faculty Institute on Blended Learning, I have discovered that blending my courses significantly increases student engagement, presence, and performance. Following the lessons from the Institute, I blended SPND 422—"Differentiated Instructional Strategies Using Technology Across the K-12 Curriculum." Now that I am working on my second and third iterations of this course, many of the key lessons from the Institute still resonate with me. For instance, the principle of "backward design," the value of representing key information in multiple ways throughout the course structure, and taking care not to create a "course and a half" have proven to be valuable lessons.

The blended course format creates possibilities for significantly increased authentic learning. Formerly, my strategies for teaching students about the value of adaptive technology consisted of demonstrations and hands-on, face-to-face work. Now, through a series of online investigations, students visit virtually with actual end users with disabilities who tell their own stories about the enabling technologies they use in their everyday lives. As a result, extraordinarily rich, insightful discussions are happening that surpass my expectations.

I also now have the opportunity to get to know my students better, and they get to know each other better. Through the blended format, students

tell me that they learn more, and gain better insight. Previously, intensive weekend sessions would end and students would lose momentum before the next session. Now because of ongoing blended activities, the course never stops between sessions—they think about it continuously and there's an ongoing engagement that wasn't there before.

One particularly powerful example of the benefits of blended learning happened in a section comprised of students who work together in a school for autism. They began the course expecting demonstrations and hands-on work, but were deeply moved by an online video produced by an autistic woman, Amanda Baggs, who describes and demonstrates the significance of the ways in which she interacts and communicates with the world. Because these students had significant time to reflect and discuss online, they were able to realize the shortcomings of how learners with autism were being taught at their own school, and together they began to rethink their teaching and to consider how to reformulate the curriculum. The overall amount of discussion tripled, and when we eventually did meet face-to-face again, we were able to go well beyond where we could have gone without the online component.

Amanda Baggs: *In My Language*  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnylM1h1zjc>



### Applications Beyond

Any faculty interested in increasing engagement, presence, and student learning will discover that their courses benefit from the blended format. I would strongly encourage anyone to try this, but to receive guidance as you go forward. For this purpose, the Faculty Institute is a great way to get started.

This course has really helped me to see how to integrate technology to benefit all students in my class. I found it very enlightening that I could develop an entire lesson (that would address the needs of all) by discussing and learning options collaboratively with my classmates. Great discussions, awesome class! Thank you.

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