My project is a video presentation centering around a classroom observation. This was a bit more of an undertaking than I anticipated, but I believe the final project captures some of the highlights that I observed. I avoided text-heavy shots because those would be difficult to absorb on a web video (consequently I used a lot of visual rhetoric), so the following serves as an overview of my project. My purpose is to investigate bridging the gap between high school and college writing. The class I observed is a freshmen composition course that meets in a computer lab. I am familiar with this course because I am in the rhetoric program, and I teach another section of freshman composition. For those unfamiliar with the course, here is a brief overview. Students complete 4-5 essays with generally open topics, and their work is graded through a rubric.

Through my observations, I’ve demonstrated some of the potential negative aspects of college courses (having too much freedom). For example, many students I taped were surfing Facebook while the instructor was speaking. These students (who themselves are just out of the confines of high school) used independent work time for social activities. They were not particularly discreet, though it didn’t help that the rows all faced front so the instructor could not see the screens. She did occasionally walk to the back of the classroom, but usually she made announcements and taught from the front.

I also interviewed two PhD students from the rhetoric and composition program. Erin offered some of the features of high school writing by suggesting it involves more
regurgitation, while Robert explained that college writing is much more heavy on synthesis. In fact, the second required writing course at BGSU focuses specifically on synthesis.

I started with about an hour of footage, and narrowing it down was not an easy task. Many of the students appeared lifeless because the class met at 8am, and that added to the less than ideal collaboration I witnessed as an observer. High schools, however, often start before 8am, so freshmen students should not necessarily be unaccustomed to taking a course at that time.

The group work that did take place involved students bringing their chairs together. You can see after viewing the video that the lab design makes that quite awkward. Group work footage looked just like individual work time, so I did not even include that footage of groups. I am led to believe that freshmen lack group work skills, so that could be something improved upon in high school courses. Also, in this class I did not notice any patterns of where students of certain gender or race sat. While my own class does separate based on race if they choose seats (and that is another issue worthy of analysis), the computer lab seemed to have no specific pattern when it came to seating.

After observing and making the video my recommendations for college courses include the following: Get students into groups early in the course, and make sure they know one another’s name. Schedule a short fun activity at the beginning of the course, especially at 8am, since it helps students focus later on if they can transition from sleep to the class. Consider lab design when choosing classroom space. As an instructor, monitor a student’s computer screen, and avoid assuming that because the students are out of high school they will always make positive work ethic choices. Lastly, use technology wisely.
It can greatly enhance a curriculum, but technology by itself will not lead to better writing or more productive class meetings.

If, after viewing the video, you have any questions, please email me and I will be happy to write back.