Imagine a poetry class taught remotely by Maya Angelou. One person – along with several thousand of his closest colleagues – could log on to a specially designed, interactive, online environment. They would have access to Angelou’s works, knowledge of poetry and personal feedback. But, how would the class be graded? The students would assess each other, in effect, creating the benchmarks for quality.

While this model may seem far-fetched, the concept is already in development at many learning institutions. With a recently procured grant from the National Science Foundation’s CreativeIT Program, three professors in the Department of Art and Art History are hoping to take this concept to a new level.

In Fall 2010, Dr. Brian Evans, Dr. Lucy Curzon, and Associate Professor Sarah Marshall received the $350,000 grant to pursue their proposed project, “Autonomous Cohorts and Emergent Learning.”

Their idea is to use a technology platform to get students to assess their peers during a course in order to form an autonomous learning cohort, meaning that the students set a standard of quality beyond what a teacher might establish in the classroom. Educators refer to this process as “emergent learning” since it comes out of the process of engaging with others. The goal is to advance not only learning but, ultimately, creativity.

Evans, an associate professor in the Department of Art and Art History, works extensively with digital media in his own work. His experience attracted him to this particular grant because of its emphasis on using technology to enhance the pursuit of creativity. Furthermore, he hoped to include in the grant a method of using computer-based peer assessment, which is something Evans had researched.

“There is documentation that shows this kind of assessment is very effective qualitatively,” he said. “If done correctly, it can be more effective than faculty grading.”

The reason for this, as his colleague assistant professor Dr. Lucy Curzon explains, is that grading a peer’s work gives a student an opportunity to compare and contrast his own work with the work of his fellows. This knowledge then allows the individual to calibrate his or her future work in the context of how other students are doing.

“If I only grade a student’s paper, he or she doesn’t have a lot of feedback or understanding of where they fall within the rest of the group,” Curzon said. “They grade effectively as well as I can, but they learn a lot more through doing it. So the more they can gauge whether they are better or worse than peers, or that they are on the same level as their peers, the more they are going to learn.”

In the context of the NSF grant, the three professors are hoping to look at current software programs to see what is already being done in the areas of computer-based assessment and learning co-
For example, while both Curzon and Evans teach lecture courses, Sarah Marshall heads the print-making program, which largely consists of time in the studio. The format of a studio course involves more time spent actually working on a project and different levels of critique from the teacher and other students.

Marshall said having an autonomous learning cohort concept could turn into an opportunity to expand the level and quality of the critiques her student receive. Instead of being limited to the critiques of their small class, students could be paired up with other students in the country. This would create artistic communities across institutional boundaries, which would provide more quality feedback.

Although the new system is promising, the argument could be made that a technology-driven course would take away from the traditional classroom experience. But, as Evans says, there will always be value in having a living, breathing human being teaching a course.

“I try to bring a little bit of passion and excitement and energy to it, and I think much of that is dissipated in a redistributed version via media,” he said.

The concept is especially intriguing for large classes. It can expand and increase the frequency of student engagement with the subject matter beyond what comes from one teacher. Having an autonomous cohort form outside of the course would allow students to interact more with one another and ultimately express creativity. A system like this, Curzon said, would work in parallel and as a complement to the weekly classes.

“...the students could be in the thousands of students with one stellar teacher, like Angelou, in the center.”

Furthermore, Marshall explains, this system is based largely on technology students are already engaging in on websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and others. She believes that people learn best by building on knowledge they already have, and an autonomous cohort would just be an extension of how most students today already interact online.