In academia we value the ability to assess an individual student’s development and ultimate understanding of concepts. We need to know that each ‘A’ earned means that a student is independently capable of applying knowledge and skills toward an end. But we can’t ignore the value of a team effort when it comes to achieving “the common good.”

A recent study from Indiana University compared two groups, innovators and imitators, in order to find which were more successful at developing solutions to complex tasks where personal choices and strategies led to success or failure. The innovators developed independent strategies and made game choices by observing their own results. Imitators looked at their competition and copied the most successful strategies of others. Imitators even imitated their imitators’ imitations of themselves, seeing improvements that they never would have considered otherwise. The results of the study showed that overall success of imitators was much higher than that of innovators, and games with more imitators collectively scored higher than those with more innovators. When the game is made visible to its players, success is recognized, synthesized, and most importantly, improved upon with micro-innovations that lead to more micro-innovations, and the “common good” is made better.

This doesn’t mean that we should stop testing students or stop expecting them to do their own homework. Or that we should train them for industrial espionage. (A healthy dose of guidance on the line between inspiration and plagiarism would be a good idea.) But we should balance individual activities and assessments with shared opportunities for students to view each other’s successes and failures in order for them to take the best parts and tailor them to their own needs, multiplying the impact of what your course teaches them.

For an interesting/extreme example similar to this idea, read: Why I Let My Students Cheat On Their Exam.

Smarthinking Online Tutoring
A reminder to pass along to your students: Each ESU student has 300 minutes of live online tutoring available to them in a variety of subjects, including multiple levels of math, science, business, ESOL, and writing skills. Tutoring is conducted through drop-in or scheduled live meetings with the Smarthinking whiteboard platform, or through questions or writing assignments posted for feedback within 24 hours.

The problem with this tool is that most students don’t know it exists or how to get there. So please let them know that inside any Blackboard course (even if you don’t have one of your own), under the Tools menu, a Smarthinking Login button will allow them to log in and get help. Visit my blog to see a video of how to access the login, and how to move the Smarthinking login onto the main course menu for easier access.
Quirky

Get your students in business

So you’ve come up the perfect product to solve a problem but know that it will never amount to anything because you don’t want to quit your job and start a company just so that… say… you can help people fit those bulky power adapters onto a powerstrip without hogging too much of its real estate. Or maybe you task your students to serve the public by creating innovative product solutions for common world problems. But what happens with their ideas after the final report is turned in and graded?

A company called Quirky specializes in these types of situations. They provide a place to share a product idea, which they work to develop and market, and you receive some of the income that it generates if it goes all the way into actual sales. And they do it fast, with the help of a few thousand friends. Between the sketch pad and the shopping cart, Quirky asks for input from “Influencers,” who also receive a percentage of the future revenue. Anyone who creates a free account can log in and answer survey questions about what features they would like to see. They can also research similar products or existing patents to influence and regulate the design, can suggest pricing or color, and can submit and vote on product names and taglines. Virtually every aspect of the future product is decided upon by interested contributors.

As far as providing a good in-course activity that applies to your content area, Quirky may seem to hit a small target market of instructors, but what better place than a college classroom to have students creatively apply their course knowledge and turn abstract concepts into concrete products?

On the full-immersion end of the spectrum, an instructor could challenge students to design and submit a problem-solving product. Quirky’s website resources would provide guidance to help, plus knowing that there was someone who might actually turn their idea into reality would be a big motivator for student effort. On the less-involved end, specific aspects of the Quirky process could play into a variety of business, marketing, economics, chemistry, writing, health, or social science activities, just to name a few. Could you create a 140-character product pitch that is good enough to get people to vote for your idea? What is the best balance between a low price that isn’t too cheap, and a high price that isn’t too expensive? What types of materials would work best for constructing the product? How do ergonomics play into successful product designs? What underlying themes drive the best product names and taglines? What types of social trends influence product ideas or the whole Quirky business model?

Visit the Quirky site, see what it can offer for your course, and give your students an opportunity to surprise you with how they use it to explore and apply your content in a novel, social, world-changing way.