Bob Neer, Lecturer
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A Jack of All Trades

Wanderlust, curiosity, and a thirst for truth blend into the eclectic life trajectory of historian Bob Neer, a lecturer in the Department of History at Columbia University. This law student turned i-banker turned media entrepreneur is also the author of the award-winning book "Napalm, An American Biography." Bob believes strongly in the power of discussion and is one of Piazza's biggest advocates.

During a trip to Stanford to give a talk this spring at the Hoover Institution, he reached out to Pooja to meet the team. Here's what he shared about his life, his travels and what it's like to teach using Piazza.

Q: *How did you first discover Piazza?*

A: "I first heard about Piazza when I read the New York Times article. I had been researching other platforms like Blackboard, but when Nick from Piazza came to Columbia and showed me the product, I loved it."

Q: *Why did you decide to try Piazza as a humanities professor?*

A: "The great thing about Piazza is it's very light, very text-based. And the students found it very easy to understand and to use. It structured our class discussion. There is no other software platform I'm aware of that would make that easy to do. If people are actually actively engaged in it, and it's a part of their syllabus, then it can be quite powerful. In fact, then it can be way more powerful than classroom discussions alone. I was disappointed to discover that not many professors in the humanities used it."

Q: *How did you get your students started initially?*

A: "I made class participation 40% of their grade and split the students up into teams, asking them to post summaries of the texts and comments on reading before each class directly on Piazza. I told them their online work was about 25% of the 40% of their grade based on class participation. This made students responsible, to a degree, for their own grades. (continued..)

A lot of practices were not traditional for the course I was teaching about my class, but I think they were pedagogically extremely useful and the students liked it. I also consolidated all of the class resources onto Piazza at the start of the term. I posted the syllabus, the requirements, class objectives, how I would grade, expectations for academic honesty, and so on, in detail and then advice about how to write papers and structure exam answers. And then I would have office hour sign-ups here because it is so much easier than Google calendar."

Q: *How did you keep them engaged enough to share their thoughts on such heavy topics?*

A: "The key for good teaching is love. You have to get some value out of it, you have to want to do it. I think that you have to read their comments and respond. Every time. In my class the issues that you confront are often really personal and very difficult, on all kinds of things like fear, love, religion, what you would die for, why you're getting your education and personal stories. You can take a lot of that knowledge and broaden it out with Piazza. One thing that made me tremendously proud was when I saw students had printed out all of the summaries in the Piazza discussions and brought them into their final exam, which was open book. That is a success. For me, it was very satisfying and rewarding."