Writing the Web: Linking Computer Technology and Writing Courses

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Web page authoring poses a double challenge as both a technical and a writing task. During fall 2000, Watauga College offered two linked courses aimed at providing first-year students with both the technical and editorial know-how to write for online audiences. Tom Van Gilder, computer consultant for the College of Arts and Sciences, taught "Exploration of a Wired World," a hands-on course designed to give the students the technical background needed to create content for the World Wide Web. These same students enrolled in Derek Stanovsky's sections of Watauga College's "Tools of Human Understanding," an interdisciplinary writing course required of all entering Watauga College students. These sections, entitled "Future Histories: Reading, Writing, and Remembering After the Internet," dealt with the intersections of technology, writing, and culture and asked students to produce writing specifically for this new medium. These courses were made possible through the support and encouragement of Cynthia Wood, Director of Watauga College; Richard Carp, Chair of Interdisciplinary Studies; and Linda Bennett, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Exploration of a Wired World

The premise of the "Wired World" course was not only to learn about creating for the World Wide Web, but also to integrate computer skills learned in this class with "Tools" from the writing class. Almost all of the students who took the course had little computer experience. We began the course by discussing the brief history of the Internet and the World Wide Web. Many students did not realize that this technology is relatively new and that they were truly at the forefront of learning in a new medium. We also spent some time learning about the technology that allows Web pages to be delivered from a server to a person's Web browser. This proved to be fairly complex for the students, as the terminology was new to them. To not overwhelm the students with an over-abundance of computer jargon, at this point in the course we began to delve into hands-on learning.

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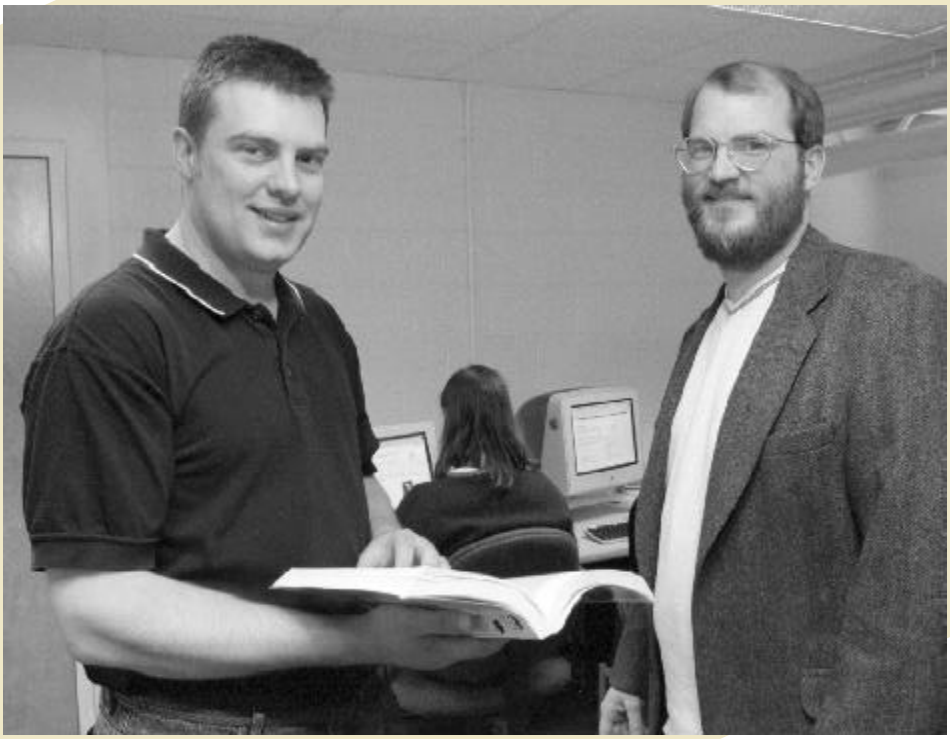
Although there are many graphical editors that allow people to easily create Web pages, it helps to know how to create and edit the HTML code. Therefore, the students began learning the old-fashioned way by typing HTML code within a simple text editor and then previewing their pages in a Web browser. The students recognized that this was a very time-consuming task and were quickly ready to move on to an easier graphical editor.

The first big project for the students was creating personal Web pages. Students had to plan an outline for their project and then create a rough draft of a personal



Tom Van Gilder and Derek Stanovsky offer a hands-on course designed to connect students with the World Wide Web.

Web site with the use of *Netscape Composer,* which is a free, basic Web editor. Students learned quickly that the planning part of creating for the Web is much more difficult than the actual development of simple Web pages. This project was revisited throughout the semester. As students learned more advanced software, they modified their personal pages. For the culminating project each student posted a final product to a personal University VAX account.

When developing the curriculum for this course, the goal was for students not only to learn how to create Web pages, but also to actually create a usable Web presence for the University community. Our class took on four major projects:
1. *The Centroid,* edited by Greg Foley, Mathematical Sciences. (http://www.centroid.appstate.edu)
2. The Office of International Programs. (http://ww.oip.appstate.edu)
3. The Psychology Department.
4. *The Appalachian Journal,* edited by Sandra Ballard, English. (http://ww.appjournal.appstate.edu)

Students spent the majority of the semester learning *Macromedia Dreamweaver,* an industry-standard Web development software and the choice of many Web professionals because of its built-in site management tools and advanced design capabilities. Students also learned graphic design software–*Macromedia Fireworks*–that integrates well with *Dreamweaver.* Students collaborated in small groups on these University projects. The process included researching other similar Web sites, brainstorming, planning, developing a minimum of three variations of a Web presence for their "client," presenting their rough drafts to the class and clients, creating a final project, and final presentations to the class and clients. These projects gave the students real-world experience as well as a sense of accomplishment in producing a usable Web presence. Three of the four projects are used at Appalachian and became available online in Spring 2001. Several students were even offered part-time employment from their clients to continue the work they started.

Future Histories

These same students also enrolled in a tech-friendly version of Watauga College's "Tools of Human Understanding," entitled "Future Histories: Reading, Writing, and Remembering After the Internet," taught by Derek Stanovsky. A course Web page that includes the syllabus, readings, assignments, resources, and student projects is posted at: http://www.appstate.edu/~stanovskydj/tools.html. Along with a number of other first-year students not enrolled in "Exploration of a Wired World," students in "Future Histories" spent the semester reading, writing, and discussing issues connected with the history of technology and its impact on culture, society, and writing. Resources for the class ranged in selections from Nietzsche and Freud to Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* and to a novel by Marge Piercy. Students were encouraged to explore connections between texts and their own evolving relationship with the Internet. At the same time, the course offered writing instruction in both the time-honored traditions of English composition and in the new fields of Web page style and online publishing. Assignments were geared toward improving students' writing skills and introducing them to the unique problems and possibilities of writing for the Web, including the use of links, graphics, and other design elements that rarely intrude in print media.

For instance, students read Nathaniel Hawthorne's essay "Fire Worship" in which Hawthorne laments the loss of the open hearth and its replacement by that new-fangled invention, the airtight woodstove. Into this seemingly trivial technological change, Hawthorne reads portents of the demise of social and domestic life. Winter evenings, which had been spent gathered around the fire in conversation with family and friends, now seem to give way to more solitary pursuits in corners of the house that used to be too cold to inhabit. Who could foresee what pernicious effects this disruption of family life might have on future generations? Students discussed the social impact of this example of nineteenth century technology and wrote about the connections they found between Hawthorne's stove and the impact of the Internet on their own lives.

Students create a draft of their personal web pages.

After approaching such questions through a variety of texts—historical, theoretical, and fictional—the final project was for students to produce their own "future history" describing how the Internet of today will be remembered, and to tell these stories in the form of a group Web project. Students from the "Wired World" course were teamed with classmates from "Future Histories" not in that course, and, together, they worked at designing and publishing a Web site containing a cross-section of their semester's writing. There were the usual ups and downs of group dynamics coupled with the added technical difficulties of publishing their work online, but all of the groups overcame these challenges and produced wonderful work.

As a team-teaching strategy, linked courses provide a great deal of autonomy for both instructors in organizing their courses while allowing each to rely on and use the specific skills and information the students are learning in the other course.

Lessons Learned

We were very pleased with how well our students performed in these linked courses. Along with the inevitable adjustments and trial and error that are part of every new course, there was the added element of linking these courses together and relying on the students' ability to put the skills they learned in one class into practice in the other. Overall, this worked well. However, if we have the opportunity to teach these classes again, we would begin the group work much earlier in the semester, spend less time on the preliminaries, and get the students involved right away in writing and publishing Web pages. This would ensure they learned the common pitfalls and mistakes early on so that by the end of the semester they could focus on honing their new skills. It also might help to have all the students involved take both courses, so that the "Wired World" students do not shoulder too much of the technical burden for the group Web projects.

It was very gratifying to see how students with little or no prior knowledge of computers became proficient at creating Web sites by the end of the semester. It was also exciting to see the creative ways in which they used these new tools and how they integrated them into their writing. As a team-teaching strategy, linked courses provide a great deal of autonomy for both instructors in organizing their courses while allowing each to rely on and use the specific skills and information the students are learning in the other course. Such pairing of technology and writing courses could also be put to work in other contexts. In "Future Histories" we took our subject matter from the Internet itself. This provided a helpful thematic link, but it is certainly not necessary. Any subject could provide the content for the students' writing, the theme for their Web sites, and the occasion for learning about writing for the Web. These skills benefit our students now, but as the Internet expands in the years ahead, they may be needed even more.

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Websites

Hobbes' Internet Timeline (http://www.zakon.org/robert/internet/timeline/)

Fundamentals of Web Design (http://eserver.org/design/urls/)

Resource Center for Cyberculture Studies (http://otal.umd.edu/~rccs)

SpiderPro's Styleguide: 100 Do's and Don'ts in Web Design (http://www.spiderpro.com/pr/prstgm001.html)