An inexpensive, relatively simple means for sharing information
with the community, the Internet offers new possibilities for
service-learning.

The Internet in Service-learning

Mark Canada

With so much work to be done, humans ought to make the most
of their energy. Yet, every year millions of young people spend
millions of hours on products that merely go into file cabinets
or, worse, waste baskets. Those young people are American
college students, and though their products—assignment they write
for school—ideally help them to sharpen their writing and
thinking skills, they do little to benefit anyone else. Indeed,
unlike their teachers, who often publish the results of their
research or use their expertise to advise organizations, most
college students write only to learn. Imagine the additional
benefits if all of that work lived a life outside the classroom,
the file cabinet, and the waste basket—a life where it went on to
serve people in need of such information.

In fact, teachers and students who have practiced service-
learning do not have to imagine such benefits. They have seen
them. By combining course projects with the work of community
agencies, they have seen their work benefit not only themselves,
but social workers, AIDS victims, and many other members of their

communities.  Now a new tool has made it easier for faculty and students to share their work with these communities.  The Internet, which makes information exchange easy and inexpensive, enables virtually any class to turn its learning into service-learning.

While the possibilities for using the Internet in service-learning are many, two approaches stand out.  In one approach, students write and design World Wide Web pages for community agencies, filling these agencies' needs for home pages, press releases, and the like.  A second, more ambitious approach is to create a large Internet clearinghouse of information that both agencies and clients can use.  Both approaches promise substantial benefits for both communities and students.

One Approach: Contributing Material to an Agency Web Site

Americans' methods for obtaining information have changed dramatically.  Just a few years ago, when we wanted details about an agency or a program, we made a phone call or picked up a brochure.  An 800 number was the zenith of agency-client communication systems.  Now we expect every major company, non-profit organization, college, and government agency to have a World Wide Web site with an overview of its programs, a link to an e-mail address, and perhaps even online application forms and other information.  An organization without such online resources can fully expect to be labeled out-of-date, inefficient, or—perhaps the worst insult of all in these times—not "user-

friendly."

As any organization that has gone online can testify, however, the cost of providing such resources can be immense. Writing descriptions, designing interfaces, and even converting existing print materials to electronic formats requires time and expertise, though surprisingly little money, making them perfect candidates for the help of colleges.

Teachers and students in any discipline can offer this kind of assistance. Obvious providers include classes in "content" areas, such as social work and health. Students in a nutrition class, for example, might collaborate on a glossary of vitamins and minerals to be posted on a health agency's page. But students in "skills" courses can do this type of service-learning, as well. What better people to design an agency's home page, for example, than the students in a computer science class? Composition students learn how to write by writing. Why not assign them essays that convey an agency's mission, programs, or clients to the community? Indeed, Ogburn and Wallace (1998) have described exactly such an assignment that they have used for first-year composition students at the University of Cincinnati.

Once you have decided to use the Internet to do service-learning, you should begin in the same way you would begin many other service-learning projects. That is, contact a partner in the community, in this case an agency with no Web site or a needy Web site. Finding such an organization should not be difficult.

Because of the demands for information, especially new information, even agencies with large, sophisticated sites probably can use help maintaining online calendars, updating their staff directories, or writing descriptions of new programs.

Once you have found an agency interested in collaborating with your students on some Web pages, you will need to discuss exactly what the agency needs.  Organizations new to the Web will need a "home page" featuring a summary of the organization's purpose and links to other pages with additional information.  Of course, they also will need these other pages, which should include a brief description of each program it sponsors, some details about the staff, and a link to an e-mail address where visitors can write for more information.  Organizations with existing Web sites probably will already have these pages, but they may need additional pages or help maintaining their existing pages.  For example, they may have added a program since their Web site was designed, or they may have decided to go online with their application forms.  Organizations that sponsor community events, such as blood drives or AIDS Awareness Week, may need help creating promotional pages for their sites.  One frequently overlooked but essential component of a Web site is a detailed description of the organization's staff and mission, along with references to sponsoring or affiliated organizations.  Without such information, many Web users may rightfully doubt the credibility of the site.

Some organizations may need additional assistance. Newcomers to the Web, for example, will need not only material to post, but also a place to post it.  Someone—the instructor, perhaps, or maybe a group of students—thus will need to locate a server, a computer that can store the organization's Web site and "serve" it up for Web surfers who wish to gain access to it. Internet Service Providers, such as America Online, sometimes offer space on their servers to individuals or organizations; agencies can also store their sites on servers managed by online companies such as Geocities (www.geocities.com) and Angelfire (www.angelfire.com).  Furthermore, both newcomers and agencies with existing sites may need help promoting their sites.  The person responsible for this task will want to contact Web portals, such as Yahoo! and Excite, using their submission procedures.

The next step is to assign these various responsibilities to the students in your class.  If the agency's needs are diverse, you will want to divide them up evenly.  For example, if the agency needs both new pages and revisions, you might have each student update one page and write another.  In completing their assignments, students will have to stretch themselves in a number of productive ways as they conduct research, interview agency staff, and then write, design, and post their pages.  Of course, they will need instruction in some areas—particularly those involving technology—but such instruction can be part of the

course.  Even in a content course, such as one in social work,
professors expect students to practice writing in their
discipline.  In this case, the professor simply would tailor
instruction toward real-life writing for the medium of the
Internet.  Furthermore, Web-authoring software such as Netscape
Composer, which can be downloaded for free from the Web, have
made designing and posting Web pages about as easy as writing and
printing word-processing documents.  After giving students a few
lessons at the beginning of the semester, professors need only
provide guidance throughout the remainder of the course as
students write, design, and post their pages.

A Second Approach: Building a University-based Web Resource

     A more ambitious approach to using the Internet in service-
learning is to build a University-based Web resource that
agencies, clients, and indeed anyone with access to the Internet
can use to obtain information about a particular subject.  For
example, students in an advanced health class might collaborate
on a Web site dedicated to promoting exercise and a healthful
diet.  A business class might produce a Web resource for
individuals starting small businesses in the community.  While
this form of service-learning requires more vision and perhaps
more work than contributing to an agency's Web site, it also may
bring more satisfaction.

     The first step in creating a university-based Web resource
is to identify a need.  While the World Wide Web already has

millions of sites on a myriad of topics, faculty and students

probably can carve out a niche of their own.  If their university

is in or near a small community, for example, they can create a

site that is focused on the needs of that community.  For

instance, a biology class might study the ecology of a city park

and report its findings on a Web site.  Even sites with broader

subjects and larger potential audiences may be good projects,

however.  Chances are good, for example, that other people

already have used the Web to report on the effects of television

violence on children, but the chances are also good that their

sites are incomplete, are of dubious credibility, or simply lack

a user-friendly interface.  In the end, improving on existing

ball-bearing technology is as useful as inventing the wheel.

Like an agency Web site, a university-based Web resource

needs a home.  Locating a server for such a site, however, should

be relatively easy.  Faculty should talk to the university's Web

administrator about reserving space on the University's server.

If possible, obtain a relatively short URL instead of a

cumbersome one that tacks a cryptic code on the end of the

university's URL.  People in the community will have an easier

time with www.cleanwater.edu than with

www.uncp.edu/~wilson/bio100/project/water.htm.

The next and perhaps most stimulating step is deciding what

kind of information will appear on this site.  Faculty should

involve students in this step, perhaps devoting portions of

several class meetings to discussions of contents.  Possible

components include an overview of the subject, a glossary of

terms, a list of links to other relevant and credible Web sites,

a link to an e-mail address where users can write for more

information, and a collection of frequently asked questions--

known in Web circles as "FAQs"--along with their answers.  For

example, a Web resource on healthful living might include general

tips on nutrition and exercise, a glossary defining terms such as

"vitamin" and "aerobic," a link to the Web site of The

President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, and questions

and answers about calories, water intake, and sports injuries.

As in the case of an agency site, faculty and students should

make sure to include a section that establishes the site's

credibility.  In particular, faculty members should identify

themselves and their credentials and explain their role in

writing and editing the material on the site.  Students can

divide up the responsibilities for creating and maintaining these

components in the same way they would handle the material for an

agency site.

Benefits for Communities, Agencies, and Students

Using the Internet for service-learning promises a number of

benefits for both communities and students.  Communities, for

example, potentially will enjoy a vast amount of new information

to aid in decision-making.  Indeed, one of the major products of

social-service agencies is information—about counseling, about

treatment, about prevention—and the Internet is an effective medium for exchanging such information.  Of course, many potential beneficiaries of this information do not yet have access to the Internet in their homes, but such access may soon become as common as cable television.  Furthermore, even those without access at home may be able to log on to the Internet at schools and public libraries.

The agencies serving these communities stand to benefit, as well.  In exchange for some time devoted to interacting with faculty and students, they will receive a substantial quantity of free public-relations material conveniently researched, written, designed, edited, published, and perhaps even maintained by a reputable professor and his or her students.  One obstacle that likely keeps many agencies from making optimal use of the Internet is the precious time needed to produce Web pages. Students, however, can commit this time and learn valuable skills and knowledge in the process.

And what exactly will those students learn?  As in the case of other forms of service-learning, they may learn more than they would in a traditional classroom.  For starters, simply interacting with social workers and others will provide them with a taste of how these professionals apply their knowledge and skills to address real-life problems and issues.  In other words, any type of learning that takes students outside the ivory tower, even briefly and intermittently, teaches the lesson that

knowledge is not merely an end in itself.  Furthermore, this particular form of service-learning gives students the invaluable opportunity to practice realistic communication with a real audience.  Instead of typing a "paper"—an assignment whose very name suggests a lack of purpose or potency—each student will be contributing to a real project with a real audience.  In doing so, he or she will use the same terms—"home page," "credibility," "mission statement"—and consider the same issues that professionals use and consider in the field.  If it is true that writing practice makes better writers, then writing real material with a real purpose in a real context for real audiences can make better real writers—writers who consider the implications of their word choice, who strive for accuracy and clarity, who perhaps even work passionately because they know that the effectiveness of their product could make a difference for someone in need of help.  Bush-Bacells (1998) discuss benefits such as these in "Innovative Pedagogy:  Academic Service-Learning for Business Communication."

In an information age, colleges and universities are leading producers of information.  Until now, that information—or knowledge, to be more precise—has come almost entirely from professors, who conduct research in their fields and then share their findings with colleagues through publication in scholarly journals.  In the meantime, their students have labored over "papers."  Like some impotent missives from the pen of Emily

Dickinson or one of Edgar Allan Poe's characters, these messages then took a rather curious, even depressing journey—from the student to the professor to the student and ultimately into a dumpster or a cardboard box stashed in a closet.

The advent of the Internet has meant that this student work can go on to live another, productive life. With some creativity and planning, faculty can give students real writing experience while at the same time giving their communities information they can use.

References

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Mark Canada teaches English at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke and edits the educational Internet site *All American: Literature, History, and Culture* (www.uncp.edu/home/canada/work/allam/allam.htm).