Technically Challenged History Professors Leading the University's Digital Strategic Plans
By *John Lutz*

There are several new or revived enthusiasms appearing in university strategic plans across the continent including: digital literacy, community and student engagement, applied learning, and skills training. Surprisingly, historians have an easy ticket to the front of this parade.

In this column I want to sketch out how faculty <u>without any experience in creating websites</u> can "publish" students' research work on the web, hit all their strategic targets, and improve student learning while everyone has more fun than the lecture format permits.

The basic principle is simple. Give students a challenging research project and post their research results on the internet. The "History Advantage" is that our undergraduate students can do original research of interest to a general audience in a way that the chemistry, engineering or architectural students cannot. By giving students an audience for their work, they see its value beyond mere evaluation, they increase the amount of work they put into it, they learn new research and presentation skills and their grades go up in step with their greater efforts.

I have experimented with several models. In one I structured an historical editing class around preparing a historic manuscript for web publication. In this case, each of the dozen students taking part in a seminar, after some instruction on the principles of historical editing, took part of the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Victoria Post journal and transcribed, edited and annotated it

for the web. Each had to produce a contextual essay to help a lay audience understand some thematic aspect that was raised by the journal: relations with First Nations, illness, agriculture, economy, daily life …. and the best were published in the on-line journal www.fortvictoriajournal.ca. The community was delighted to have access this resource which previously was only available locally on microfilm interlibrary loaned from the HBCA archives.

Another model is to structure a course around a research theme and publish the thematically linked papers on a website. I have seen this used to great effect by Scott Sheffield and Robin Anderson at the University of the Fraser Valley with World War II theme http://app.ufv.ca/fvhistory/studentsites.html. I have created a web gallery of student micro histories on the theme of

Victoria, B.C. in the Victorian era at www.Victoriasvictoria.ca. Both my class at UVic, and the UFV students worked with local community or First Nations groups on their projects and now I get regular requests from civic organizations asking if my students can work on a project related to their organization's history. At the end of the course I pass my hat around to my dean, librarian, provost, and ask for a few dollars for a public launch party and invite the community groups onto campus for a celebration of student community-engaged research!

Thanks to the public launch, the local TV and newspapers ran stories, the history department was way out front in community engagement. Students got to see their work published, got to bask in the glory of the press coverage, and saw their skills affirmed by a wide community, as they add them to their resume.

How can this work for technology challenged professors? One way is to recruit a unit on your campus dedicated to teaching technology support to help. Many universities and colleges have such a unit and both my colleagues at UFV and I have recruited them to either 1) teach tutorials on creating websites 2) co-teach the course handling the technical aspects 3) or simply do all the work to transform student papers into a website. Another way is to take advantage of popular, free and easy to use software that will take your words and pictures and create a web site for you. Word Press is a widely used example and Apple users have their own website creation software free with their computer. Even Microsoft Office will export to the web though the results will not win any design prizes, and Facebook offers another venue. A third method for the digitally handicapped is to use professional development, course development, digital enhance-ment or student employment subsidies to hire a computer science or fine arts student to create the site for you. A final possibility, which I have not yet tried, is to team up a history and a computer science proffessor and class with the goals of creating dynamic, interactive historical research products through team work.

The feedback from courses in these formats tells me that students put in way more work than for other courses, learned more skills, and had more fun. When I compare grades of students which I also have in more traditional courses, I can see that on average they get better grades in courses where their research is published. Finally, the students see what kinds of history work and do not work on the web. No one should graduate from university without sophisticated abilities to evaluate digital media and courses like these are important pieces in developing those critical skills. Even techno-phobic faculty can master the critical analyses skills, and have a colleague or a student do the techno-heavy lifting, and be the surprise leaders in front of their university's strategic plan.

Student, faculty and community contributors to the newly released online Fort Victoria Post Journals celebrate the launch under the gaze of Chief Factor and later Governor, James Douglas, at the University of Victoria, May 2, 2012
Des étudiants, professeurs et collaborateurs de la communauté célèbrent le lancement du projet des Journaux en ligne Fort Post Victoria récemment diffusés auquel ils ont participé, sous le regard du facteur en chef et ensuite gouverneur, James Douglas, à l'Université de Victoria, le 2 mai 2012