

WEBCT AND THE CLASSROOM

About two years ago I got my first-ever job as a university professor, teaching an American history survey to a summer evening class of about fifty in a twice-per-week, three hour marathon with no time allotted for small-group discussion. Ugh! I was very concerned. I'd always believed that tutorials were where the best kind of learning went on. I have serious doubts about the old "sage on the stage" approach to lecturing, preferring, to borrow a phrase from colleague Gary Owens, to think of my role as "the guide on the side." I like to make lectures interactive, to get students thinking and talking and arguing about the material, doing *anything* other than sitting on their butts transcribing my notes. But without any tutorials I began to worry that the class would become a weekly six-hour exercise in transferring my notes into the notes of my students. I wondered if some sort of technological fix wasn't possible - a virtual tutorial.

WebCT, which by now is used by most campuses, is software designed precisely for this sort of thing. It was created in order to replace the old correspondence courses and their early on-line equivalents, and most of the time it's used for Distance Learning. But I'm one of a growing number of professors using it for on-campus courses as well, replacing all the functions of class websites that are hard to maintain and not interactive. For that summer class, I passed on the "chat room" option and set up a discussion board, where students could "post" messages for others to read and respond to, and made it worth an experimental 10%.

I am not suggesting that the discussion board was a perfect substitute for real tutorials, but I can't say that it was inferior, either. In fact, it became something different altogether. As I hoped, it got students talking and actually applying what they were learning in class (I'm one of those people who thinks that history should be useful) especially since the discussion would often turn to current events. But what genuinely surprised me was the extent to which issues raised in class carried over onto the WebCT board and then, how often those discussions spilled back into the class. Moreover, the board gave students unlimited time in which to discuss any issue related to the course (something hardly possible in the jammed-to-the-rafters, 50 minute tutorials we tend to get these days.) Suddenly even the most apathetic students of American history were intrigued. No longer did discussions about, for instance, the Bill of Rights, seem to be only about the distant past. Now the students had a real incentive to discover why, for instance, debates in Kansas over "intelligent design" are closely related to very old arguments about what the First Amendment means. Many shy students found their voice on the board, and carried that new-found confidence into class. Best of all, for the first time I found myself doing what I had

always wanted to do as a discussion leader: acting as a referee rather than goalie.

When the Canadian election was called in November, I created a discussion board for my Canadian history survey. The course usually featured tutorials, I hadn't worked with a board until that point. I invited students to discuss the election, which they proceeded to do. Spontaneously they began considering the relationship between the old tariff debates and NAFTA, whether Canada is, in light of historical facts, really a "nation of peacekeepers"; they also argued over the precise nature of Confederation - i.e: what is it with those Quebecers, anyway?

All of this has taught me an important lesson: I need to teach tutorials differently. Crammed into a room with twenty-five students and given fifty minutes once per week to discuss the next two articles in the pre-packaged reader, I seldom have time to explain that, yes, believe it or not, this stuff actually is relevant.

I'd be lying if I claimed that maintaining a WebCT site doesn't take some time. But I've found it gratifying and it saves me time in some other ways, too. When students come to me for handouts they've missed or to ask for a new copy of the syllabus, I can direct them to WebCT. Since the course requirements are spelled out there for all to see, students who fail to meet those requirements have one less excuse. It's also where I store my PowerPoint slides, the movie and sound clips I play in class, and how I provide them with series of links to class-related resources on the Internet. I even create a virtual office (a two-person chat room) the night before tests and essays are due. I get bombarded by e-mails on those nights anyway, and since I'm usually near the computer in the evenings, writing or gathering fashion tips and the like, it isn't much trouble to have a brief virtual "chat" with students who have questions.

As always, technology by itself can't solve teaching problems. But used selectively and effectively it can help.

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