

THE :-) AND :-(OF TEACHING ON THE WEB

I taught on the Web because of a beautiful Web site. One day while surfing, I came across the Cimarron County Historical Museum of Kansas site, which ran a permanent exhibition about the dust bowl. Through evocative photographs and diary extracts, the museum discussed how massive dust storms had pounded the Midwest in the 1930s. Wouldn't this be wonderful, I thought, to use in my course? Tell students about the natural and man-made causes of the dust bowl and then - click - take them to a small museum in a town where it actually happened. I could think of no other medium which would allow me to teach in quite this way.

At the time, I was teaching North American environmental history - the history of the humans' relationship with nature - by correspondence for Queen's University. Part-time studies agreed to put my courses on their Web site, and I spent a couple of days rummaging around the Web, finding sites to link to. In those heady days of 1996, widespread interest in the Web was just catching on and I hoped the Web's novelty might lead a few students to read the notes that way, jumping to the Cimarron County page and others while they were there. It was also a way for part-time studies to advertise the course, and for me to advertise my work.

I happened to mention the new Web site to a friend, the history chair at the University of Prince Edward Island, and he asked whether I would be interested in developing something similar for them. And that's how, during the 1997-98 academic year, I found myself teaching for UPEI from Queen's, some 1,300 kilometres away.

Since I was a computer neophyte, maybe I should have declined. But it seemed so sensible: all the players involved would benefit. Students would be introduced to a field otherwise unavailable to them at UPEI, and would profit from the array of information available on the Web. UPEI's history department would gain a course in a new sub-field, while its extension department would experiment with the new technology and get a glimpse of what all their distance courses might soon be like. I would have the chance to teach my specialty at two universities, without commuting. And as far as I know no environmental historian had taught online or even set up a Web site. I was intrigued - and a bit intimidated - by the opportunity to offer my views on environmental history for the world to see.

To make this a true experiment, UPEI and I decided to run as much of the course as possible by computer. The notes were to be placed on a Web page, class discussion was to be distributed through an e-mail listserve (a discussion list accessible only to the

students and myself), and even essays and exams were to be e-mailed. Though students were free to phone or mail me, they were encouraged to try e-mail first. The only concession to paper was that students were to have textbooks, available through the bookstore.

GETTING READY

Much of the summer before the course was to begin I spent scribbling together notes, tracking down links to other sites and sending the material on by disk. (We avoided the messy intellectual property question by having it agreed in writing that I would have first chance to teach the class any subsequent time it was offered.)

I was happy that UPEI had their tech people construct the Web site, but in retrospect I regret this. I would have learned much more in building the site myself, and it would have made editing through-out the year much simpler. On the very day of registration, the Web site finally came up for two one-term courses in North American Environmental History, History 491 (fall term) and History 492 (winter). Please visit them at www.upei.ca/~extensio/History.htm and [History2.htm](http://www.upei.ca/~extensio/History2.htm).

Only six students registered for History 491. I was disappointed, but UPEI was content. This was thought not an unreasonably low number for a fourth year history course not in the calendar. Besides, this was to be an experiment, so UPEI was happy to start small.

The course was divided into weekly lessons, though students could access the Web site and manage their term as they saw fit. Lessons consisted of lecture notes, questions about the assigned readings and links to sites. It wasn't flashy, but it provided a good grounding for environmental history.

In developing History 491/492, I had grown more and more enthusiastic about the roles the links could play. For example, when students read in Lesson 3 about Chief Seattle, whose 1854 letter to the U.S. President is often cited as evidence that Natives were the first environmentalists, they were directed to one Web site proving the letter to be a fake, and another from a Native activist defending its authenticity. In Lesson 12, students were invited to visit the home page of their textbook's author, Stephen Pyne, and even e-mail him with questions or comments. As a teacher, I was excited by these opportunities to inject contemporary, global and visual material so conveniently into a history course.

SITE CRITIQUES

To encourage full use of the Web, History 491's first assignment was an "Internet Field Trip." Students were to pick a topic they felt would be relevant to environmental history; and research it on the Web. They then were to write an essay describing the sites they found and critiquing their search itself. Most importantly, they were to evaluate whether they trusted the material found on each site, and why. Some students showed remarkable ingenuity in tracking down information, while others stopped at the first roadblock in their search, or went too far into a deep but ultimately irrelevant Web site. This assignment proved a useful first step in tracking down students who needed help learning to search the Web and it made all students treat critically the information the Web offered. I would most definitely assign this again.

As the year progressed, History 491 and then 492 ran quite smoothly. Students seemed to know what was expected of them, and understood what the course, both as environmental history and as an experiment in Web-based teaching, was trying to accomplish. My sense is that some students - perhaps those most interested in computers, or with the best access to them - made full use of the notes and links, while others read some of the material at the last minute when work was due. Much like any other course, really.

LITTLE DISCUSSION

The course's greatest failure was its inability to promote discussion. The listserv had been meant to allow students to e-mail the entire class (or me alone) with questions or opinions about material. I even told them they could talk about assignments there. But the listserv stayed largely silent. Colleagues have since told me I should have demanded class discussion by giving marks for class participation, and by e-mailing pointed questions over the listserv. But this was already a "lecture course" and a "correspondence course" of sorts; it struck me as unfair to demand that it become a seminar course as well. It also seemed too forced, too much an attempt to recreate the classroom experience in cyberspace, when freedom from the classroom had been thought a worthwhile reason to develop the course in the first place.

Students were as unwilling to contact me as they were other students. My e-mails often went unanswered. The physical distance between Prince Edward Island and Ontario, and the psychic distance between a professor and students who never met, meant I was unable to maintain a good sense of how students were faring - to a far greater degree than in the five correspondence classes I have taught.

As the school year's end approached, History 491/492 seemed a qualified success. Four of six students completed 491, and the six

students in 492 were doing fine. They seemed to be keeping up with their reading, and their first of two essays were handled reasonably well. But as I waited for the second set of papers and the take home exams to arrive, a funny thing happened.

They never did.

Not a single assignment arrive. The course ended with zero students. It made marking easier.

The university and I were both upset and went looking for answers. Surprisingly, students did not speak of mutiny against the course, or even dissatisfaction; each spoke of academic or personal situations which affected their ability to finish the year. None spoke of the Web-based nature of History 492 as a factor in their dropping it.

My sense is that students found this course their most easy to ignore. When they were faced with problems and got behind in their work, their long-distance course was the first to go.

This reinforced the main lesson I learned from the year's experiment: Web courses are above all distance courses, and distance rather than the medium itself is the most important element. A university which dreams of using computer teaching to expand its student base is really only extending its extension department, and relying on present-day fascination with the Internet to make it happen. My experience suggests students will not make the jump so willingly. Correspondence courses have been around a long time, and still most students choose to take courses on campus.

Another lesson learned was that the Web's very contemporaneity creates its own problems. The Kansas Web site that had inspired me in the first place? It was there when I wrote the course notes, but gone by the time UPEI built the site. I could find no mention of the Cimarron County Historical Museum anywhere, let alone its exhibit. Because of my reliance on such Web sites, the flow of the course was affected by matters completely beyond my control. More generally, it was surprising to find that the range and quality of Web material about environmental history did not improve markedly during the past two years. In my discipline, at least, we seem still to be largely relying on the first generation of Web users, and waiting for the next generation to create a much deeper Web.

Throughout the year, colleagues at Queen's kept up-to-date on my Web-teaching experiment, and asked tough questions about it. Isn't the opportunity for dialogue a necessary component of teaching? Doesn't learning demand face-to-face contact? After voicing such pedagogical concerns, they would invariably turn to professional ones. Aren't you helping make professors irrelevant? What's to keep universities from forcing you to sell your course outright, and then hiring you at a much lower rate to teach it?

Aren't you the thin edge of the wedge? It was interesting to hear tenured faculty making 10 times my salary on, at most, twice my teaching load express fear of academic exploitation. But I had asked myself the same questions, of course.

I had felt all along that the best example I could serve was to develop a course for the right reasons, teach it as best I could, and protect my interests throughout. Right or wrong, I do not think I participated in the death of the classroom. In a tough job market, I found a way to introduce an interesting challenging course in my specialty to a university a time zone away.

Despite the disappointing conclusion to the year, I may very well teach North American environmental history for UPEI again -- with some changes. Now that the course and its Web site have

been designed, it will be quite easy to re-offer it. Who knows? Perhaps I should put a course like it on a Web site of my own, and offer it to the hundreds of universities and colleges across the continent. Even if only two percent of those schools hire me. I could make a nice income out of my home.

But don't e-mail me just yet for details. I'm old-fashioned enough to still dream of finding a traditional academic job, in an educational system that has room for young teachers.

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NOUVEAU SITE WEB

«Histoire Québec» est un site relativement nouveau sur Internet visant en premier lieu le grand public, mais qui comporte de nombreux intérêts pour les professeurs de premier cycle universitaire en ce qu'il comporte de courts articles. De plus il renvoie à d'autres sources et sites d'intérêt historique, dont les archives choisies du quotidien «Le Soleil». Sous la direction de l'historienne Marcelle Cinq-Mars (et commandité par entre autres la compagnie de logiciels «De Marque») le site offre, sous

forme de faux articles de journaux, de courts résumés de l'histoire du Québec et de la région de Québec. Sans comporter la richesse d'un site comme «Le Musée virtuel de la Nouvelle-France», il occupe pour l'instant un champ relativement négligé de l'histoire sur le Web et a l'avantage d'avoir des collaborateurs qui sont historiens diplômés.

Histoire Québec: www.histoirequebec.com

Musée virtuel de la Nouvelle-France: www.mvnf-civilisations.ca

NEW INDEX ON-LINE

Computerised indexes are an important innovation of the information age which have made the job of a historian much easier; nevertheless, the greatest obstacle with these cd-roms is that many of them are far too expensive for university libraries to purchase. As a result, many historians still spend a great deal of time flipping through volumes of paper indexes without the aid of key-word searches. For some medievalists, however, this may no longer be the case. The Medieval Feminist Index is available on-line, free of charge, and is supported by the libraries at

Haverford College and the University of Iowa. Begun in 1996, this index is a very thorough guide to a wide-range of publications concerning women, sexuality and gender during the Middle Ages. The database currently includes over 3,000 records from the years 1994 through 1998, and it is being added to all the time. It has user-friendly search functions, and it provides a lengthy abstract for most publications.

<http://www.haverford.edu/library/reference/mschaus/mfi/mfi.html>.

ROYAL COMMISSION ON HISTORICAL MANUSCRIPTS ON-LINE

With the myriad record offices and archives of varying sizes across Great Britain, it can be a very daunting task just to track down the location of original historical documents needed for research. The Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, however, has gone a long way towards eliminating that problem altogether by making the National Register of Archives available on-line. This index allows users to search any repository in Great Britain by place-name, personal or corporate name. This web site also boasts the beginnings of the Manorial Documents Register which, at the moment, contains information on the where-about

of manorial documents in Yorkshire, Hampshire, Isle of Wight and all of Wales, but promises to eventually include all of England as well. The web site not only offers the historian a convenient and speedy method of finding resources, but it also contains all necessary contact information (including e-mail addresses and URLs) and the facility's opening hours. This site is highly recommended for anyone planning a research trip to Britain any time soon.

<http://www/hmc.gov.uk/main.htm>

CANADA'S PRINTED HERITAGE VIA INTERNET

Early Canadiana Online (ECO) is up and running. This innovative project is moving Canada's printed heritage on to the Internet at «www.canadiana.org».

Now, viewers in Canada and around the world can experience online some of the most significant people and events that have shaped the nation.

To date, the full text of some 2600 books and pamphlets originally published between the 16th and early 20th centuries have been scanned and are now available on the Internet. Subject

areas include Canadian literature, women's history, travel and exploration, the history of French Canada and native studies. By August, the ECO database will comprise some 3200 titles, one third of which will be in French.

Early Canadiana Online is a collaborative project of the Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions (CIHM), the National Library of Canada, Laval University Library, Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, and the University of Toronto Library.

