Faculty Home Page—More Than a Gimmick

All the talk about technology in education may lead you to believe that a Web home page for faculty is just a gimmick to make faculty look good, but it can be a powerful teaching tool. I have designed a student-centered home page, *The Student Writer's Web*, for teaching English composition and literature. This home page helps me achieve three goals: simplifying the use of the Web for beginners, facilitating the research process, and expanding the audience for student essays.

While student presence on the Internet is growing, beginners are often overwhelmed by the volume of information and their limited computer experience. The faculty page can teach students to improve communication and channel creativity by gaining optimum use of the Web. My home page is divided into eight categories, each of which may be utilized for either group or individual instruction in computer, research, and writing skills. Novices learn to use the medium as they read the contents of each part, and more advanced users quickly discover new sources of information. The most helpful sections so far have been Web Basics, Resources for Research, and Student Essays.

Web Basics offers some simple terms, guides to the Netscape browser, and—for those interested—links to using HTML, the language for writing web pages. The document may be printed and distributed as a handout for students who need extra time to absorb the new concepts.

Under Resources for Research, two forms allow students to search from the site by simply typing a word or phrase. Alta Vista (Digital Corporation) has one of the largest databases, and Excite provides concept and review searching as well as a rating system which sorts sites by confidence. Although there are dozens more search engines to use, the forms are an efficient way of teaching keyword searching for Internet and library research. Links to the search tips explain how to limit both simple and advanced queries. The research section lists the Clearinghouse and W3 Catalog for subject-oriented searches. Students can make use of the catalog's tree branch system for help in narrowing a topic for a paper.

The last items in the research section are libraries. The Library of Congress provides extensive information for legal, copyright, and historical topics which may be accessed and printed from their web site. If computers are equipped with a telnet application program, students may also access and browse the catalogs of area libraries.

The Student Essays file is a collection of writing composed for course assignments. At the end of each semester, I ask students to choose the best work from their portfolio to read to the class. Many are inspired as much by successful student writing as they are by professional creations. Thus, while this web file began as a means of extending the writer's audience to a wider community, it has become a working incentive to achieve good writing and to generate ideas for current student writers.

While all the posted essays follow a traditional format, some make use of hypertext links to related sites. My Basic HTML guide (part of Web Basics) encourages writers to tap into the Web's power by finding and creating links to valuable Internet sources. I advise students to keep an electronic copy of their work which is easily converted to HTML for posting on the Web.

The Student Writer's Web is an enhancement, not a substitute, for the work we do in the classroom. Its future role will expand as problems of accessibility and limited computer skills are overcome. For now, it is an effective tool for teaching computer skills and research techniques, and for publishing student writing.

Sheila Booth, *Instructor, English*

For further information, contact the author at Quinsigamond Community College, Worcester, MA 01606. e-mail: sheilab@qcc.mass.edu

The Complete Writing Course

"Take whatever lies about the tongue and turn it into a butterfly" was a favorite student response to my in-class writing assignment: "In 25 words or less, describe how to tie a shoelace." In 12 words this student did what I have been advising students to do throughout my 25 years of teaching college-level writing.

With an employment history divided between academia and journalism during the past two and a half decades, I have been writing the same comments on paper after paper from semester to semester from generation to generation. Like many of my English composition colleagues, I have been tempted to write a text that would be definitive work to show someone, anyone, how to compose articulate thoughts and images with maximum efficiency. I have fantasized about achieving fame and immortality for a semester or two by leaving behind a valuable compendium of tips and tricks that will make students become clearer thinkers and more expressive communicators.

Of the hundreds of papers I read each semester, one ubiquitous, overriding problem has not changed. Most students are not comfortable with providing ample, concrete details to illustrate their points. As a result, I find myself writing a basic refrain over and over again: "Use more details, fewer words." Now, each semester I provide my students with one work that offers more than a lifetime of writing courses, reading seminars, and study skills workshops: Francis Bacon's single-paragraph treatise "Of Studies." In less than one page, this centuries-old essay packs all of the advice one could possibly need or tolerate.

In class I have found something productive to do with my students' time. They write. This takes two forms. The first is done in class. These assignments, like describing a paper clip or the weather, are primarily designed to get them accustomed to working under pressure. The second kind of assignment is due approximately every other week. In one or two pages, using the classic modes such as description, comparison and contrast, and illustration, students are asked to write about topics of their own choice. They determine the content. I supply the critiques. My only suggestion is that for each paper they engage in the simple, Thoreau-like act of driving "life into a corner and [reducing] it to its lowest terms."

The refrain "use more details, fewer words" becomes a leitmotif for the semester. However, by mid-semester, it begins to take hold. The papers become noticeably more vivid, more engaging, and, as a result, more successful.

I am tempted to conclude with a new system, another innovative lurch into the mire of writing pedagogy, but I will not. Teaching writing is almost as absurd as writing about how to teach writing. Writing cannot be taught. At best, it can be practiced, encouraged, supported, and scrutinized.

The two best writing teachers I had were my two grandfathers, immigrants from Czechoslovakia and Italy. The former always kept a dictionary at arm's length whenever he was reading or writing. The other, a barber, simply told me that I should get a blank book and write in it every day. He assured me that people who did this led a rich life.

Even though I was only ten, and his advice was punctuated with riffs on his mandolin and pithy shots into his spittoon, I was curious. When I asked him what I should write, he thoughtfully chewed a bit and then said that it did not really matter. "Just make sure you use the right words," he concluded before going back to the strings that he had been nimbly picking.

Gary Mielo, *Assistant Professor, Journalism*

For further information, contact the author at Sussex County Community College, College Hill, Newton, NJ 07860.