



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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CONSTRUCTION OF A WEB SITE

• Summer 1998

Good news arrives from the college president's office: All FCCJ faculty will receive new state-of-the-art computers with high-speed Internet access—the intent is to initiate more computer usage across all disciplines. The computers are delivered the first week of the fall semester along with the requirement that all syllabi are to be placed on the FCCJ server by fall 1999. The college will provide training to assist faculty who have little or no web-authoring experience.

• October 1998

The eight-week web authoring course starts, and I am learning Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML). Soon I can generate web pages, access the server, handle graphics, and produce links. When introduced to Netscape Composer—not nearly as powerful as writing HTML code directly but much easier to use—I come to realize that creating web pages with graphics, tables, and links is no different than using a word processor.

• November 1998

The time has arrived to launch my very own web site, and I need to develop a home page befitting a chemistry professor. After considerable thought, I opt for a blank periodic table highlighting the position represented by thallium—students actually believe the element was discovered by my great-grandfather. To produce the figure, I am told to make a "bit map image." The chore turns out to be much easier than it sounds, and a suitable image is achieved. The periodic table is followed by my name, title, phone number, e-mail address, office hours, and links to three course syllabi. Bravo! The minimum requirement for fall 1999 has been attained, but I am nowhere ready to quit. What else to put on the web site? Unfortunately, the course emphasizes the development of web pages, but not content.

After viewing the dozen or so existing sites of FCCJ colleagues, I borrow some ideas from these web pio-

neers. Menus offering syllabus, calendar, practice exams, and handouts are generated for each of my courses—the text files already exist and are readily converted into HTML format (web pages). Following the lead of some colleagues, a "Professor Background" page is added to display resumé items, such as degrees earned, these topics, teaching experience, and publications. As a novice with but a few weeks of web authoring experience, I have done well; still, I yearn to do something creative and not merely convert existing text files into HTML format.

Coincidentally, my article "In the Pursuit of Trivia, Improving Student Performance" is published in *Innovation Abstracts* (November 1998). The article described how trivia generated from chemistry lecture was used in an attempt to combat absenteeism. Although written a year earlier, recent e-mails from readers perk interest in the subject once again, and I begin thinking of ways to combine trivia with the Internet.

The outcome is Scientist Trivia, sort of a game consisting of 13 multiple-choice questions. For example, who is considered the greatest American chemist not to have won Nobel Prize? The choices are Acidio Dotman, Gilbert Lewis, or Edwin Thall. The first selection displays an Edsel with the comment, "Wrong! Return and try again." The second choice (correct answer) links to a site with a wealth of information about Lewis. Anyone bold enough to select the third option is greeted with my (humorous) picture with the comment, "Good choice but incorrect; return and try again." Although no masterpiece, Scientist Trivia provides invaluable experience with its 29 web pages, 23 external links, and 13 images. In addition, the game requires learning to use a scanner as well as the computer's photo editor to annotate, crop, and "doctor" images.

Armed with newly acquired skills, the Professor Background page is expanded to include teaching philosophy, hobbies, actual publications, external links, and pictures. Course information is left intact since images take time to load and students are already highly focused when searching old exams.



• **December 1998**

The fall semester ends, and I have three free weeks to play with the computer. The next project involves searching the Internet for pertinent links in chemistry and physics. My objective is to find sites so interesting, entertaining, and informative that no curious person could stay away. Some topics (relativity, antimatter, carbon dating, chirality, and DNA) are briefly mentioned in my courses, and links would offer the opportunity to learn much more. Other links are attention-grabbers (greatest scientific achievement, Thall's favorite chemist, most famous science photograph, and photos Einstein never posed for). This page, "Thall's Favorite Links," evolves to include useful references (Encyclopedia Britannica On-line, periodic table, and Chemistry Web Directories), as well as an assortment of links outside the realm of science (Fascinating Places, Wonders of Ancient World, and shark teeth).

After teaching college chemistry for almost 30 years, I have learned to take nothing for granted, and so I devise a plan to encourage students to visit favorite links. Every exam/quiz will feature one announced topic accessible from favorite links. A casual reader could earn a few bonus points by answering questions such as who was the most famous occupant of the Lucasian chair (Newton), what is one limitation of carbon-14 dating (50,000 year validity), or what is the name of Florida State University Science Library (Dirac).

• **January 1999**

The winter semester begins, and students are directed, on the first day, to obtain course information at the web site. About half the students have Internet access at home; the others will have to use the computer center. Soon I start hearing, "I liked your hobby page," or "I played Scientist Trivia," and "Is that picture really you?" This provides feedback that students are checking out everything at the site. When I suggest posting scores by code as soon as exams/quizzes are graded, the response in all classes is unanimously positive.

• **February 1999**

This month marks a milestone with my first web publication, "Thall's History of Quantum Mechanics." The work of 12 scientists/mathematicians are highlighted with pictures, anecdotal material, and about 40 external links. Using the Internet to collect information makes this task considerably easier than writing a conventional article. Besides not having to deal with editors and referees, I can now publish in color—using pictures and different layouts.

• **March 1999**

Four months have elapsed. I have gone from not knowing what to put on the web to having more than 200 pages. Did the president of FCCJ know this would happen? I have come to realize that a web site is not about computer skills, but creativity—sort of like running your own magazine. I decide to write an article detailing the process of constructing a web site.

• **April 1999**

Recounting the development of my web site is complete, and I am ready to send the manuscript to *Innovation Abstracts*. What started as good news, followed by anxiety over syllabi, and then a search for ideas turned into an indispensable tool for teaching chemistry. The problem now is finding enough time to implement goals of posting class notes, providing real assignments and not just trivia, and generating more web publications.

It is difficult to believe that 25 years ago I wrote exams by hand, made copies with a duplicating machine, and never had to tell students to turn off cellular phones. With the advent of low-cost powerful computers, it's even more difficult to envision what teaching will be like in 25 years.

Edwin Thall, *Professor, Chemistry*

For further information, contact the author at Florida Community College at Jacksonville, 11901 Beach Blvd., Jacksonville, FL 32246. e-mail: ethall@fccj.org
web site: <http://web.fccj.org/~ethall>

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor

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