Developing Internet Skills

"You can find more information at their web site on the Internet." Many instructors assume that students know how to access and navigate the Internet, but may be surprised to learn that students' skills are not very well developed after all.

In the text for my introductory mass communication course, one chapter is devoted to the Internet; without question, students find this chapter the most interesting. However, prior to beginning any discussion, I conduct a survey and assess students' experiences with the Internet. Surprisingly, most students indicate they have little or no previous experience.

Knowing how to turn on a computer and access the Internet may be what some students mean when they say they "have experience" using the Internet, but it is important to know if they have engaged in serious academic research, sent and received e-mail, subscribed to newsgroups, and the like.

It is important that students be given the opportunity to gain purposeful Internet experience. Devoting one or two class sessions to various facets of the Internet (using search engines, newsgroups, listservs, e-mail, IRC, etc.) is not going to give students all the information and tools they need, but devoting some class time to developing Internet skills is a step in the right direction. For example, demonstrating proper methods of using search engines will not ensure that all students will search the Internet efficiently forevermore, but it will provide them with opportunities to identify and begin to develop these skills. Moreover, hands-on activities following instruction will provide critical reinforcement.

One useful assignment I always make is the "Internet Scavenger Hunt." I give students a list of 10 questions covering a wide variety of topics and a list of search engines. They must use the search engines and the World Wide Web to find answers to at least five of the questions. Recent questions addressed inventions ("Who invented the helicopter?"), trivia ("Who was the voice of Rocky on the 'Rocky and Bullwinkle Show'?"), and music ("What is the birthdate of Eddie Vedder, the lead singer of Pearl Jam?"). In order to receive full credit for their answers, students must identify the search engine and the keywords they used, the location (page number) of the answer, and the answer.

Obviously, the primary goal of this assignment is that students learn by actively completing the work. Students get on the web and use it in a supervised setting, feel the joys (and frustrations) of using search engines to find information, and gain experience in choosing the proper keywords to be used in a search. Students are encouraged to use some of the search-narrowing methods covered in class—e.g., using quotation marks around an exact phrase they want to find in a search. They find, in some cases, that there is conflicting information.

Perhaps most important is that students discover they may have to use more than one search engine or different keywords to find the information they seek. Many students enter my class thinking that any one search engine—Yahoo, Alta Vista, Lycos, etc.—covers the entire Internet. They find, however, that by switching to a different search engine, often using the same keywords, they find different (and often more useful) information.

In addition, students learn that the WWW is not the only Internet application useful in educational research. Other applications such as e-mail and newsgroups/ discussion groups give students access to resources they would not be able to locate otherwise.

I use this personal example about a project of my own in a course I recently completed. The project required me to use the Macintosh-based program of HyperCard, but our campus only utilizes IBM-compatible machines. I wondered if there was a way to convert the program from the Macintosh-based platform to one that was PC-compatible. Over the course of six to eight months, I consulted with several knowledgeable computer science and communication resources on campus and in the area; most agreed there should be a way to do it, but no one knew how. Then one day while browsing the newsgroups, I discovered multimedia productions and HyperCard groups. I posted a question asking if anyone knew how to convert such a document. Within four days, I had responses from all over the world, the most useful of which came from a computer science professor at a Belgian university.

While students should be encouraged to have a

healthy skepticism about information gleaned from the Internet, discussing this skepticism provides an opportunity to emphasize the value of confirming information by double-checking sources. One question in the "Internet Scavenger Hunt" assignment—"What is the birthdate of Eddie Vedder, the lead singer of Pearl Jam?"—illustrates this point. There are several sources on the WWW which include his birthday, but they do not agree about his birth year. Pointing out these differences confirms that there are no "absolutes" in information sources on the WWW and that there is value in verifying information.

Moreover, it is always useful for instructors to learn more about Internet technology and techniques. Some may feel they are behind the curve with computers and the Internet, and perhaps a noncredit class or an in-house workshop would be helpful.

It is unrealistic to expect that spending one or two class sessions on the topic of the Internet or giving an assignment requiring Internet research will equip students with all the knowledge they will ever need. But providing guided instruction, demonstrations, and practice in using the Internet, on a regular basis, will give students the opportunity to develop proper and useful research strategies of their own.

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Using the WWW: Inspiring the Uninspired Reader

Using cyberspace in lieu of a regular college textbook to teach critical reading skills to uninspired developmental students seems to work! These students have spent years in the educational system; they are unmotivated, uninspired, frustrated, and skeptical when enrolling in yet another reading course. When they enter my classroom, they immediately learn that something will be different. There is no textbook; instead, they hear about the World Wide Web, e-mail, cyberspace, and web pages.

Students are introduced to cyberspace with the *San Antonio Express-News* and *Newsweek* on-line. Weekly quizzes and daily assignments are posted on my website. Reading *Newsweek* articles on current affairs has taught students that critical reading can be fun, entertaining, painless, interesting, and relevant.

E-mail is used to "talk back" to the editors of the local newspaper and *Newsweek,* and to communicate with me and other students in the class.

Integrating technology into the reading curriculum has given my students a new start and a new hope that reading and using new technology are not out of their grasp. And, my desire for my students to become lifelong learners and readers moves closer to reality.

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