

# Spinning Webs:

## Integrating the World Wide Web into the Composition Classroom

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*Recognizing the importance of computer literacy, I have always incorporated computers into the content of my composition courses. Before this year, the only experience I gave my students was word processing skills, requiring composition be done on word processors. I have expanded their skills and knowledge by using the World Wide Web as a resource.*

Although word processing skills are certainly valuable, there are many other ways that writing students can use computers to their advantage, and this year I have shown them those advantages. I use the World Wide Web as supplementary text by having student access sites corresponding with themes discussed in class. The following themes work particularly well with web assignments.

**People at Leisure.** This web assignment involves simply looking up information on the web and reading it. After reading a selection in our textbook by Marie Wynn, *The Plug-In Drug*, which discusses the impact television has had on the American family, we talk about the perception of television at its advent. The premise was that a television in the living room would bring a family together watching favorite programs. Of course, the opposite has happened: now a television is in every bedroom, and family members disperse to watch their favorite t.v. shows. Turning the discussion toward home computers, the students' next assignment is to access the National Council of Educational Technology's web page (<http://ncet.csv.warwick.ac.uk/WWW/menu/role/par1.html>). This site's "Parents' Page" provides advice about buying home computers, involving children in educational technology, and monitoring what children are exposed to on the Internet. After reading this page, students take notes on the information and bring the notes back to class. We discuss what they have found and predict what effect home computers will have on American families. Their writing assignment is to discuss those effects in an essay.

**Learning Experiences.** This assignment involves doing a little more research. As the class explores learning experiences inside and outside the classroom, we read John Cheever's *Expelled*, which illustrates learning experiences in and out of the school house. Then the students look up *Mark Twain Resources on the World Wide Web* (<http://web.syr.edu/~fjzwick/twainwww.html>) and read *Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar* through the *Scattered Writings* link. After reading the maxims, students are to choose a few that are memorable or significant to them. Back in the classroom, we discuss the maxims students chose and determine how these maxims are relevant in contemporary society. The writing assignment is to discuss how a maxim is significant to the student or to the contemporary world.

**Confronting Life and Death.** After reading Dylan Thomas' *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*, and Richard Selzer's *The Discuss Thrower*, the class discussion emphasizes the effects death has on the loved ones left behind as well as the effects a coming death has on a dying person. Since many of my students are unfamiliar with hospice care, I have them access a hospice web site:

*Hospice Care: The Common Pathway* (<http://www.ilinkgn.net/commercl/author/hospice.htm>). This web site defines hospice care, explains its underlying philosophies, describes eligible patients, and notes bereavement counseling available to a patient's family. One great link on this web site is *The Front Lines of Hospice Care*, which takes students to accounts of people who have been affected by hospice care. These stories are written by family members, hospice patients and the care providers, and the narratives vividly illustrate to students hospice's benefits. These narratives foster lots of discussion among students, so when I issue writing assignments, they have generated many wonderful ideas. Their writing assignment is to discuss how they have been affected in some way by death (although I explain that this assignment does not require writing about something especially traumatic). Students write essays on their pets dying, their friends who have had a loved one die, their experiences as candy strippers in hospitals, and, of course, experiences when loved ones died. Usually, the essays are heart felt and well written.

**Argumentation.** After discussing some selections in the text book about controversial issues such as non-smoking policies in public places and capital punishment, students access "Thomas Web," the web site maintained by Congress (<http://thomas.loc.gov/>). Students are to look at the "Hot Bills by Topic" page and select a topic that interests them. Once they've chosen a topic, they can read all current Congressional bills on that topic. Students must support or oppose a bill in an argumentative essay.

Finding web sites corresponding with themes in my courses was very easy. I simply used a web directory. My favorite web directory is "Yahoo" (<http://www.yahoo.com>), but I also like "McKinley" (<http://www.mckinley.com>) and "Lycos" (<http://www.lycos.com>). When I use these search engines, I simply type in a few words related to my topic, and in a minute I have a list of relevant web sites. Then I surf through these web sites and find the one that works best for my unit.

Another valuable web site for teachers incorporating computers into their courses is the "World Lecture Hall," maintained by the University of Texas (<http://www.host.cc.utexas.edu/world/lecture>), which provides links to online classes in various disciplines. Linking onto these sites not only shows me what other faculty are doing with their students but also provides the professors' E-mail addresses so that I can contact them and get advice for my own classes.

Integrating the Internet into my courses has been the most exciting change I've made in my teaching in years. The students enjoy it, and they become computer literate in the process. And at the same time, I'm teaching my students not only to write well developed college essays but also to find new ways of communicating with others. I've found that this is certainly one easy way to make computers relevant to the writing classroom. •