

THE ON-LINE PROFESSOR: USING INTERNET TECHNOLOGY IN COLLEGE COURSEWORK

KERWIN SWINT, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY

Only two or three years ago, the Internet was a mere curiosity to most educators, even those involved in research activities. It was too new, its full range of uses were not known (and still aren't, for that matter!) and the technology itself seemed distant and unfamiliar from the everyday routines of instructors and students.

Currently, however, the use of Internet resources in education is exploding at all levels, from pre-school through graduate school. Several things have occurred that help explain why.

First, and perhaps most important, the technology has become *easier* to use for those who are not computer experts (like myself). When I first started exploring the Internet, I needed constant help and prompting from computer-savvy students and academic computing staff. The technology has become so easy, though, (the experts call it "goosey") I now find myself able to help colleagues and students use on-line resources and adapt them to the classroom.

The second thing that has happened is that the sheer *amount of content* on the Internet has expanded dramatically. It's now possible to find a wealth of resources and ideas for classes on everything from medieval art to advanced physics, and everything in between.

Another development is the fact that more and more people are buying and using computers, thereby increasing students' and instructors' *access* to the Internet. This is partly due to the lower cost of computers, due to increased competition, and partly a result of people finding more and more uses for the technology — for everything from family finances to games, e-mail communication, and on-line research.

College instructors have found a number of educational uses for the Internet, including communicating with students via e-mail or bulletin board systems, discussion groups using newsgroups and listservs, the use of World Wide Web pages for posting class syllabi, schedules, assignments, quizzes, etc., on-line research assignments (either individual or group-focused), video-conferencing and distance learning, and even teaching courses entirely on-line.

E-mail—The simplest and most-often used on-line resource is electronic mail. The ability to send and receive electronic messages has greatly expanded opportunities for contact between instructors and students. Having the instructor's e-mail address on the course syllabus allows students to send questions, make appointments, or turn in

assignments. It is also a convenience for the instructor, as it can save time and save paper.

An instructor can also send mass e-mails to an entire class or a specific group by creating a "nickname" and entering students' individual e-mail addresses. If you have Eudora, this is done by clicking Tools, then going to Address Book.

Bulletin Board Systems (BBS)—A BBS is a form of on-line discussion group. Using a BBS can be a great way to carry on class discussions outside of the physical classroom and encourage students to interact with each other on-line. One benefit of an on-line discussion forum is that it increases students' opportunities to participate — especially those students who may not be particularly talkative in class.

I have had good results from a BBS system for my classes hosted by the KSU server. To get a look at the courses using BBS, point your web browser to bbs.kennesaw.edu. Moderated discussion forums, such as those hosted by a university BBS, require a password to post a message on the system, but anyone with a web browser can read the messages.

Newsgroups & Listservs—A newsgroup is another type of discussion forum, in which people with similar interests, whether occupational, academic, or leisure, can exchange information and carry on discussions. Most newsgroups are maintained and distributed by a system called USENET. It works the same as a BBS; users post messages and interested parties can read them.

Depending on what browser you have, you can click on News Server or Discussion Groups and view the newsgroups available on your system. Newsgroups are broken down into categories, such as "alt" for alternative topics, "k12" for education topics, "soc" for social issues, and so on. Each category will have hundreds or thousands of active newsgroups on a number of issues and interests.

One classroom use for newsgroups is to assign students to find discussion groups appropriate to the discipline or course and follow the discussions. Many students are able to tap into sources of information about an issue or topic that are not available elsewhere. There are a number of

specialized discussion groups that would be of interest to students and instructors.

One good place to start is www.liszt.com/news/, which is searchable database of newsgroups.

A **Listserv** is yet another type of discussion group that allows users to subscribe to an e-mail list that distributes messages. A student can subscribe to a specific group on, say foreign language education. They will then receive messages from this discussion group in their e-mail, which they can read, respond to, or delete. A good place to find a list of academic-oriented Listservs is n2h2.com/kovacs/.

World Wide Web Pages—College faculty can use a web page for a number of things. And the technology has become so easy, and there is so much help available, there is no longer a “good” reason why every instructor can’t have their own web page or pages.

Many faculty have “personal” web pages that list their academic specialties, research and professional interests, etc., and have links to other pages that have detailed course information. Some just have course syllabi posted. Others may post lecture notes, homework assignments, inter-active quizzes and exercises, links to research information, and access to class discussion groups. To catch a glimpse of how some college instructors are utilizing web pages, go to one or more of the following web sites:

www.bus.iun.indiana.edu/users/larry/faculty.htm;
acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/; www.und.nodak.edu/instruct/knorman/521/bandlit.html. To see some examples of inter-active web pages, try walking through a heart dissection: www.heartlab.rri.uwo.ca/dissection/dissection.htm
Do some French grammar exercises: www2.sp.utexas.edu/fr/student.qry
Plot some geometric models (www.geom.umn.edu/~fjw/pisces/demos/models.cgi).

On-line Research Assignments—One of the greatest uses of the Internet for education is individual or group-focused research. More instructors are assigning students research projects that involve using the WWW for accessing research data, government documents, scholarly journals, reports from think tanks and private foundations, and sites for academic research. As more information becomes available on-line, students can cast a wider net in their research activities.

For example, in my political science courses many students have great success using sites like Thomas (thomas.loc.gov), which is a site supported by the Library of Congress, providing access to its database on current and past legislation. Another popular site is VoxPop (www.voxpop.org), which is a gateway to hundreds of sites relating to government and political research.

Instructors and students in the physical sciences may start at the homepage of the National Science Foundation

(www.nsf.gov); those in English or literature may want to visit the Literature on the Web Index (www.nagasaki-gaigo.ac.jp/ncs/faculty_staff/ishikawa/amlitk/19th/real_ind.htm). One word of warning, though—make sure students document their sources, especially the primary source of information. There is a fair amount of junk out there, along with undocumented sources. However, if sources are meticulously documented, it needn’t be a problem.

On-line Courses—Many colleges and universities now allow students to take courses entirely over the Internet. Visit one of these “virtual” classrooms at the University of Maine: (www.enm.maine.edu/courses/business.bua263web/). Or how about this, a consortium of several western states have joined forces to create an on-line credit-granting institution of higher education, where courses are exclusively on the world wide web — visit Western Governors University (www.westgov.org/smart/vu/vu.html).

Course Management Software—There are software programs available that are tailored to the needs of college instructors who are looking for a package, or “suite” of applications that bring together various tools and resources useful for on-line instruction. Some of the better known are Web Course in a Box, TopClass, and WebCT.

Academic institutions may be able to get preferred rates for site licenses, depending on the number of users. I have had good results using Web Course in a Box for my upper level classes. This program allows the instructor to post course information, syllabi, lecture notes, schedules, special announcements, links to class discussion forums, and links to WWW sites. All of the features are integrated into one package that students can access by using a login ID and password.

On-line Resources For Instructors—There are a number of helpful resources for college instructors who want to use Internet technology in their courses. There are sites of interest for beginners up to advanced users on everything from how to set up and use discussion groups to how to use a homepage and post inter-active exercises.

One place to start is the World Lecture Hall (www.utexas.edu/world/lecture/index.html), which is a huge set of links to college courses currently using Internet technology, from Accounting through Zoology. Also, check out Teaching Sites on the Web (www.unc.edu/~healdric/soci380/weblinks.html) and the City University of Hong Kong (edtools.cityu.edu.hk/wwwtools). For an index of web links that can take to these sites and much more, visit the educational technology links on my homepage: ksumail.kennesaw.edu/~kswint/bookmark.htm. *

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