CREATING WEB PAGES FOR TRADITIONAL, SEATED COURSES

Students often look to the Internet as a way to supplement the information found in their standard textbooks. The strategy of "just Google it" is typical of today's Internet-savvy undergraduate. Virtually all students can benefit from using such resources, but a major problem is the sheer abundance of information.

Additionally, how can students easily distinguish between good information and bad? How can instructors help them stay focused on the subject matter at hand? One solution is for the instructor to create basic web pages, tailored for the particular course or courses, providing students with concise, centralized locations for vital, useful references.

As a horticulture instructor, I am responsible for teaching many classes throughout the year, covering a number of different subject areas. After several years of using the standard audio/visual media available (overhead/slide projectors, PowerPoint presentations, etc.), I decided to create multiple web pages related to many of my courses that could serve as tools for enhancing their learning experience.

Goals

I wanted to create a single entry point or "portal" for accessing all courses. By clicking on the appropriate course heading, students could easily and readily access each individual course. Operation of the site needed to be simple and intuitive. I wanted to avoid a lot of the "bells and whistles," so common to many sites today, where the actual content is buried by the presentation. "Form follows function" definitely applies here. I wanted a unified look and feel throughout. Every page should have the same basic layout, color scheme, and font type and size. This would eliminate distraction and focus the student's attention on the content, rather than on the presentation.

With the assistance of our college's information technology support staff, I created a simple web page using readily available software (in this case, Microsoft Expression Web 2, but any other similar software should work fine). You do not have to be an HTML coding whiz, but a basic understanding of HTML certainly helps. As a matter of fact, there are plenty of websites that publish code that can be readily adapted to "plug-in" to your custom website—e.g., creating features like cascading menus, dropdown lists, slide show presentations, etc. Most of these sites only require that you credit their site when using their material.

Web-based resources are especially well suited to presenting visual information. Several of my courses involve honing basic skills in plant and insect/disease identification. The simplest approach for the newcomer is to insert small images (thumbnails) along the page margin. To view a larger, more detailed image, the user need only click on the thumbnail. As mentioned previously, a more sophisticated approach is to use "canned" HTML code, readily available from the Internet, for presenting images in a more formal slide show. All of the images can then easily fit within a small "footprint," thus reducing page clutter.

A useful feature to include with each web page is a way to monitor page "hits" with some type of embedded counter. A more sophisticated approach is to use tracking software. I like to use the latter because it lets me know when students are accessing information. For example, I often find that my web pages are quite popular the night before a previously announced quiz or test. Again, there are plenty of websites that offer free tracking software that can be inserted easily into each web page.

Keep in mind that once you undertake a project such as this one, you will likely find yourself constantly adding new features, "tweaking" existing content, etc. Remember that for the site to be useful it must be available to students at all times. I use a road analogy. Repairs are an ongoing process for any heavily travelled roadway; but while such repairs are being made, other lanes must remain open and usable.

Using customized web pages as a supplement to your course textbook(s) is an excellent way to keep students focused and interested in the subject matter. By using

commercially available HTML programming software, virtually anyone can create professional-looking web pages in a matter of just a few hours.

As an example of what can be accomplished, visit the Haywood Community College horticulture website at potemkin.haywood.edu/hor (do not use "www").

George R. Thomas, *Instructor, Horticulture Technology*

For further information, contact the author at Haywood Community College, 185 Freedlander Drive, Clyde, NC 28721. Email: gthomas@haywood.edu

SPEECH CRITIQUES: USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO ENCOURAGE SELF-EVALUATION

Activity Background

In 1969, Andy Warhol said, "In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes." Who needs 15 minutes? With social media and wireless digital devices, fame is constant. College students have immediate access to personal videos, pictures, and messaging at their fingertips. One form of social media, YouTube, has become an important teaching and learning tool, allowing students to critique themselves in my Introduction to Speech class.

My quest for a fresh way to present students with criticism was born from my frustration. Nervous students delivered speeches, and traditionally I wrote critiques that evaluated their verbal and nonverbal skills. These critiques were overlooked and tossed aside. I needed a new way to make students interested in their performance. First, referencing my past experience in speech class, I considered the classic, clumsy video recorders that accommodate VHS tapes. Surprisingly, the college library still had a few of these prehistoric devices available for checkout. However, knowing that social media is a popular trend, I turned my focus to the classroom. With classes equipped with wireless Internet, laptops, and mounted projectors, I decided to give students their fame, by allowing them to critique themselves and their classmates via their speech videos posted on YouTube.

Activity Description

The process is simple. On the first day of class, I announce that each speech will be recorded digitally, posted on the Internet, and evaluated by class members. There is usually little resistance; everyone wants to be famous. Throughout the semester, each student's speech is recorded and uploaded onto YouTube, placed in a private group that I authored. By making the speeches private, only the speech students and invited guests are allowed to view and comment on the videos.

In order to make social media a teaching tool, the assignment requires each student to watch his or her speech, critiquing it for adequate verbal and nonverbal skills. Evaluation categories, derived from lectures and the textbook, reinforce lessons. Students then post their critiques online for others to read. Students are encouraged to watch each other's speeches and post comments of encouragement and advice.

As a final component of each speech assignment, near the end of the semester, students are required to pick their favorite speech video from each speech method delivered in class. Though there is some favoritism between friends, the favorite speeches are generally the best. These students are given bonus points; and when given permission to reference their speech videos, I add the superb speech samples to a video catalog to use in future classes.

Activity Results

After using YouTube as a speech critiquing tool, I learned that students are very critical of themselves. The postings are honest, with statements such as, "I play with my hair a lot," and "I didn't know I sounded like that." Interestingly, additional postings on the videos produce conversations between students that offer helpful advice and personal experiences. The objective of the assignment—to encourage students to evaluate themselves to identify room for improvement—was met.

Social media, specifically YouTube, and technological advances in the classroom provide the opportunity to assign students activities that are important, interactive, and personal. Honest critiques, interesting online conversations, and a voting system that recognizes exceptional speech assignments offer new ways to teach and evaluate in an Introduction to Speech class.

Maria Christian, *Instructor, Communications*

For further information, contact the author at Oklahoma State University Institute of Technology, 1801 E. 4th Street, Okmulgee, OK 74447.
Email: maria.christian@okstate.edu