

1999

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Recommended Citation

Ballard, T. (1999). Building the Information Bridge. *Information Today*, 16(1), 38.

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The Systems Librarian

by Terry Ballard

Building the Information Bridge

As library students learned, it takes a team effort to build a virtual library

"I think it is time to teach a class that goes beyond the concept of Introduction to the Internet," said my library school associate dean, Theresa Maylone. That seemed like a fun challenge—take a classroom full of future librarians who were already Internet-savvy and teach them some of the things that I do. That is, after all, the chief reason for having adjunct professors teach library school classes. We bring a practical approach that comes from working out in the field.

All of this made me deal with some of the big issues, starting with the question "What is it that I do?" That hearkened back to my own days in library school, at the University of Arizona in 1989. Half of my classes were taught by one professor, the late and much-lamented Edward P. Miller. There are a lot of details in those classes that have passed me by, but there is one thing that he deliberately planted in our heads: "Librarians are the bridge between people and the information they need." This is what I am still trying to do, using the technology that has come into play since those days.

In the ensuing months the course outline took shape and was moved to the Web for anyone to see. (It is still there at <http://invictus.quinnipiac.edu/summer98.html>.) At some point, I realized that the final project would be a virtual library. I would divide the knowledge globe into 12 or 14 equal slices, and then have each student put together a hundred links for that realm. They would need to have at least one layer of subcategories, and they should

avoid pages that only provide links to other sites. Otherwise, they could include whatever they considered to be significant in their field.

Opening Night

By the time of the first class, it had filled to the comfortable capacity of the computer lab where I taught it. This could either be a reflection of my reputation as a teacher or simply the fact that automation classes are popular in library schools. In talking to the students, I soon realized that the second situation was more accurate. If any of the students knew me from Arthur Dent, they never let on. In making the introductions, I found out that we had a mix of public and special library track students. All of them also told me that they needed instruction in HTML programming. This was a surprise, but I was perfectly happy to trade some of the Web content lessons for HTML programming instruction. By the end of the first class, I had covered some of the basics of programming, and I looked into a sea of glazed faces. I drove home assuming that every one of them would drop the course within 48 hours. When the dust cleared, nobody dropped, and I even gained one student.

I started their HTML training by giving them each a disk with a simple file that demonstrated some of the basic commands and headers. I had them change some of the language to personalize the statements. We then went out on the Web and found images worth saving. I demonstrated how to right click and save an image to the floppy, and then call up that image in their file.

Next, we had the lottery for picking the subject for their final projects. They drew numbers out of a cup to determine who could pick first. The student who drew #1 chose Literature. As they came up to choose, Education, History, and Government information were chosen. The student at the end of the line chose Social Science.

I wanted them to have some experience with sending files to an external server, so I procured a Web page at Geocities for the entire class to use. I was happy to find out that all 13 students could be logged into the same file manager at the same time. That page became a communal sandbox for the class as their pages developed, and it allowed them to learn from each other in a very direct way. It also gave them the freedom to work from home, and it gave me the opportunity to chart their progress. The downside was that the management of Geocities would drop by and plant Java scripts in each of their files to carry out its advertising. It is their right to do that, but it didn't sit well with us in this situation. We moved the actual class project to a server at my college. It can be found there today at <http://invictus.quinnipiac.edu/lis901/LIS901VL.html>.

Putting It All Together

As the students dived into their own areas on the Internet, I found a way to ensure some uniformity with the project. I provided them with a simple template to use in the construction of their tables:

```
<TABLE BGCOLOR=purple CELL-
PADDING=3 BORDER=3>
```

```
<TR><TD BGCOLOR=beige><AH
REF="url"> LINK </A> </TD> <TD
BGCOLOR=yellow>
Description</TD></TR></TABLE>
```

This turned out to be a good compromise. In a fairly simple format it taught them the mechanics of a basic table of Web links. They got to pick out their own colors for the cells, but the look throughout the page is fairly constant. Each of them chose one image to symbolize their area, and I will be adding a visual link to each of their subpages.

As the class progressed, so did the work. Some of the students had an easier time than others, but the best moments were the ones where a face lights up and the student exclaims, "I get it!" There were lots of those moments. At the end, we had to make up a class period that was missed when I went to the ALA conference, so we arranged to have one final class session in Cyberspace. We lined up a semi-private room in a chat area. Occasionally somebody from the outside would drop by and be astonished by the conversation that was going on. Most chat rooms that I have seen never rise above the level of "Howz the weather out there in Charlotte?" Our group was discussing Internet censorship, the future of research on the Web, and the Meaning of It All.

It was a long month, and before it was over, one of the most promising students became seriously ill, and two more students took extra time to finish the work. As always, I felt privileged to be sharing my knowledge with future colleagues, and I learned more than anyone.

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Nichols Advanced Technologies Releases Update to Athena Webserver

Nichols Advanced Technologies has announced the release of Athena Webserver v2.1, with substantial enhancements over the previous award-winning version, according to the company. Athena Webserver puts libraries using the Athena library automation system on the Internet or their local intranet, allowing patrons to search their collections using a standard browser. To see Athena Webserver in action, access a link through the Nichols Web site at <http://www.nicholsinc.com>.

While Athena Webserver's interface has changed slightly, the main improvement in Athena Webserver v2.1 is the addition of Visual Search, an icon-based tool that allows patrons to search for items and launch bibliographies using visual clues as well as text. Patrons can click through a hierarchy of colorful buttons to narrow their search and find the items they want. For example, they may start by clicking on the "Geography and History" button, then click on the "History of North America" button, and then click on the "North Central States" button, which displays their search results.

Libraries can also create bibliographies of items and place them under a Visual Search button that displays the bibliography. For example, librarians might want to create a bibliography of items on a subject their patrons find interesting, like the "Amazon Rain Forest." Once they do, they can attach the bibliography to a button they label "Amazon Rain Forest." When a patron clicks on the "Amazon Rain Forest" button, the bibliography is displayed. And schools, for example, can have a button that says "Teachers" or "Professors." When a patron clicks on the button, a subsequent group of icons—one for each teacher—appears. When the patron clicks on a teacher, a bibliography of items the teacher recommends is displayed.

If the library has cataloged Internet resources such as Web sites, patrons can view the record of the site, then go to the site by clicking on the hypertext link.

In addition to Visual Search, this new version of Athena Webserver also offers several features included in Nichols' Athena library automation system but not in the first version of Athena Webserver.

These include the ability for a patron to specify the indices of each of his search terms, browse indices, and search by barcode number and call number. Athena Webserver also allows patrons to sort their search results by a number of criteria. And Athena Webserver now includes "See" and "See Also" capabilities.

"With this new release, we're providing unique capabilities for libraries on the Internet," said Bruce Butler, president of Nichols. "Instead of providing a way to search only the library's book and magazine holdings, we're giving libraries the tools they need to get directed information to their patrons—like cataloged Web sites, bibliographies on particular topics, and more. This new version of Athena Webserver takes our approach one step further."

Athena Webserver allows anyone with an Internet connection and a browser to search the library's holdings. By giving the public greater access to its resources, the library can develop better relationships with, and gain support from, their communities, according to Nichols.

Athena Webserver enables patrons, via the Internet, to initiate a search and carry out any other Athena search functions, such as browse displayed results or view bibliographic and copy information. Patrons can even find other links directing them to addresses on the Internet where additional information on their topics can be found. And they do not need special "client" software to access the library; all they need is a browser.

Athena is the best-selling library automation system for Windows and is one of the highest rated library automation systems in the world, according to the company. In a recent rating of 36 library automation systems by the American Library Association's *Library Technology Reports*, Athena received the highest ratings overall—and in 10 of the 12 categories considered. Athena provides circulation, searching, cataloging, cross-platform capabilities (Macintosh and DOS), and related functions for large and small libraries and school districts.

Source: Nichols Advanced Technologies, Austin, TX, 800/642-4648; <http://www.nicholsinc.com>.