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The Systems Librarian

by Terry Ballard

Doing a Class Act in Library School

Teaching a class on Internet resources became a learning experience

Once in a while, they say, it's good to break out of one's comfort zone to expand one's repertoire of experience—even for systems librarians. So when the voice on the other end of the line said, "I know this is short notice, but," I realized this might be my chance to do just that.

It was the dean of the extension program for a nearby library school. "There is a course on Internet resources that needs a teacher in 5 weeks and I think you'd be perfect for it."

Perfect? I'd never taught a *real* course for the library school. So far, I had just done one-night continuing education courses. Five weeks didn't seem like enough time to get ready for my maiden voyage into teaching. On the other hand, I'd always wanted to do this, so how could I say no?

"That's the spirit," said the dean. "There is a course outline developed, and I can work with you over the thorny issues. Even though there is a set curriculum, everybody teaches the course based on his or her own particular strengths, so there is nothing to worry about. You'll do great."

Great did not seem like an option; I'd settle for not being a complete disaster.

An Electronic Adventure

She was true to her word, meeting with me or e-mailing me every day as I got the foundation together. It was to be a one-week, full-day course, taught in a computer lab. We picked three guest lecturers to fill in some of my gaps. One presented original research on search engines. The second described the solutions that the Internet presented for sight- and hearing-impaired users. The third was the director of an Internet-delivered retrospective journal database. I assumed that the first day would be taken up by getting to know the students and the last day would concentrate on final projects.

Since this was a course on Internet resources, I thought it might be a good idea to practice what I preached and make the entire thing electronic, including the readings and the homework. The final

project was to be a Web page, which they could choose to publish at the library school's site, if they desired.

I adapted the existing course outline as a Web document and appended it to my Web page. (It's still there at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/3632/syllabus.htm>.) I then added a second document that was taken from a bookmark file. It included materials on the history of the Internet and a generous supply of URLs providing excellent, top-quality information.

There was also a section of materials from the opposite end of the quality spectrum. For instance, the Hollow Earth Society and the Flat Earth Society both have impressive, authoritative-looking Web sites. To be charitable, at least one of them must be wrong. I also included the Heaven's Gate site and Eliza, an "interactive psychologist" that is actually a computer program.

Getting Up and Running

The week before class started, I met with the people to make sure that all of the computers were running as needed. There are too many live computer demonstrations ruined by faulty computer connections of some sort. Indeed, each PC had a Web authoring program, and the connections looked good for a class of 15. A few days before the first class, I started hearing from students. One of them noticed the furious pace of course development because the Web page changed some every day.

The first day of class was spent getting to know the students—I was relieved that they were mostly at about the same starting point. Only one or two had programmed HTML. I spent a good part of the day lecturing about the things that led up to the Web—the founding of the Internet, telnet, ftp, gophers.

For the next day, I had them prepare a one-page summary of the day's activities. Seeing those, I learned that I should spell out unfamiliar terms. One of the students referred to UNIX as "eunuchs."

The day went well, except that I hit a roadblock with my idea of a paperless

course. The students expected a printed syllabus, so I made arrangements to print the Web page.

The second day started with my first guest speaker—a colleague who had done a serious study of search engines. She demonstrated how the same search could turn out a lot of different ways, depending on whether you used Hotbot, AltaVista, or InfoSeek. The students were enchanted.

Afterwards, I went in-depth on the things that could be done with bookmark files, knowing that this skill would be important for their final projects—an annotated "Webliography" on some topic of their choice. In the afternoon, I sent them over to the next lab to scan pictures that they had brought from home.

The first student brought a sunset picture that looked great on paper and absolutely stunning as a JPEG file. As I saw the reaction from the other students, I began to discover the magic that occurs when a teacher has a good day. I went home thinking that I could really do this.

Wednesday's lecturer described the ways that text information on the Internet can be converted into speech synthesis programs and Braille printers to make an awesome array of information available to blind and deaf patrons. Afterwards, we hit our first technical roadblock. Either through inexperience or the tightly controlled computer lab programs, a number of students had overlaid their scanned pictures from the day before with bookmark files. We overcame those setbacks by closing time as their Web pages began to take shape in the sort of simple "Hello World" form with a button or bar borrowed from the Internet right below.

The Home Stretch

Thursday became completely consumed by building Web pages. The speaker gave them a glimpse of an Internet future that included full text from centuries past—available to users anywhere in the world at any time of day. By the time the day was over, I wished I could use the copy program to make a few extra Terry Ballards. At the beginning of the course, I told the students that I would

stay at the lab as long as anybody needed me. By the fourth day, that meant at least 90 minutes.

Friday began with a student who crept up to the desk to tell me that he lost the floppy disks containing his page when his bag was taken from a restaurant. I told him not to worry—I'd make sure that his page was reconstructed. By this time, the desperation was at a fever pitch, and I was logging about 20 miles by running from computer to computer. Lots of the questions were simple computer issues that could be addressed by the computer lab staff who were in the next room and would solve a problem if specifically asked.

At noon, I looked over and saw that the student who had lost his disks was no longer there. He ended up taking an incomplete and made it up a month later, but at the time I felt that I had failed in some way. At 5 p.m., most of the students turned in their disks and headed home, although a few stayed later, and some of those took advantage of an extra week before I had to turn in the grades.

A Passing Grade

I had dreaded grading, but when I looked at the final projects, I had a relatively easy time sorting things out. On the last day of class, the students got to grade me. There was a high enthusiasm level in the room, but I knew from past experience what would happen. About 10 of the students thought that it was a great course. Four of the students had problems with the course content. Two of those wished they had gone on a fishing expedition instead. One of them said that I was disorganized, unhelpful, and should take up a different line of work, preferably on some other continent.

The people who did like me said things that I will treasure forever. One comment that sticks in my mind was made on one of the nightly reports: "Does a class have the right to be this much fun?"

When I accepted the assignment, I thought that I might end up learning as much as my students. Actually, I learned more.

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Innovative Interfaces, Blackwell's Book Services Announce Agreement to Implement EDIFACT

Innovative Interfaces, Inc. and Blackwell's Book Services have reached agreement to implement EDIFACT transactions. According to the recent announcement, this will represent the first implementation for both companies of EDIFACT, an international standard that designates formatting rules for electronic data interchange for business transactions.

"Innovative is delighted to partner with

an outstanding firm like Blackwell's for this new capability," said Sandy Westall, vice president of Innovative. "This will enable customers of both firms to take advantage of this international standard with such features as title status responses."

Current plans are for initial availability in the first quarter of 1998 with additional EDIFACT capabilities added later.

"This planned implementation of EDI-

FACT is a huge step forward for the joint customers of Innovative and Blackwell's," said Allan Graham, director of technical services, marketing, and sales for Blackwell's. "It represents a commitment on the part of both firms to help customers perform their work more efficiently and to ultimately realize substantial cost savings."

Blackwell's provides a full range of

traditional library book-selling services integrated with the latest in library technology and technical services. Blackwell's has offices in Lake Oswego, Oregon, and Oxford, England, with a distribution center in Blackwood, New Jersey.

Innovative Interfaces is a leading provider of library automation systems to academic, public, and special libraries. Innovative's products are installed in more than 600 sites serving over 900 libraries in 19 countries around the world.

Source: Innovative Interfaces, Inc., Emeryville, CA, 510/655-6200; <http://www.iii.com>.