

What Does "Raising the Bar" Mean When We Talk About Computers in the Classroom?

Chancellor Bardo's phrase, "raising the bar," has been widely discussed on campus this year. In the area of computer technology and teaching, I would suggest that "raising the bar" does not simply mean challenging our students to learn more about computers and how to use them to enhance learning. I believe the phrase also implies that faculty must learn how computer technology can enhance teaching. Specifically, I think faculty and staff need to raise their own skills in the use of the Internet--especially in the use of the World Wide Web. What would happen if all of us--even English teachers--made the World Wide Web a requirement in our classes, with a class Web page an end-of-term student publication?

Last year, after seeing what students at Montrose High School in Malibu, California, had created--their own pictures and articles about what they had read, observed, and discovered during several weeks and months of their school term--and after seeing the pictures and articles they presented from the Sistine Chapel, the Lascaux Caves, and Ireland, I decided that I should encourage my students to use and work with the World Wide Web, too. Bob Houghton in Elementary and Middle Grades Education started me out. "The students need this," he said. "Put requirements for Web use into all your classes and--though some may complain--they'll teach you how to make the best use of the Web."

So, in the Fall of 1995 and Spring and Summer of 1996 I made Web work an integral part of each of my classes, in both literature and writing courses. I was assisted from the beginning of the project by Laura Chapman and Chris Martin in the Faculty Center, by Bonnie Beam in Micronet, and by Debbie Justice, Patti Johnson, and Carlos Benevente in the Computer Center. With their guidance, I settled on three computer tools: CONFER, VAX e-mail, and LYNX and Netscape 2.0 to access the World Wide Web. CONFER linked my students and me so we could talk outside class about reading, projects, and class discussion. E-MAIL permitted individual communications. NETSCAPE gave students (and me) new materials to investigate--including pictures and other graphics, as well as articles and opinion pieces.

Despite continual glitches in the learning process--for me as much as for my students--most were using e-mail fairly quickly, many accessed Micronet CONFER, and all learned to use the WORLD WIDE WEB as a research tool. At this point, I decided to require students to

- (a) provide some discussion feed-back on CONFER each week,
- (b) check their e-mail for messages from me at least every 2-3 days,

(c) incorporate at least one Web site into their class presentations and research papers, and

(d) turn in two "Reviews of Web Sites," (to teach discriminating choice of Web materials).

The final outcomes for my experiment with computers in the classroom were mixed but in each class a handful of students blossomed into the use of the technology. These students provided ideas, reactions, and questions on CONFER, to which I responded on a regular basis. In this way, students generated ideas for papers, exam questions, and follow-ups to class discussion; they also helped design and write the class Web page. Others merely used e-mail to explain problems or request extensions, but most provided an on-going stream of questions and reactions to the works assigned for class. Use of the WORLD WIDE WEB produced exciting and unexpected materials for presentations and papers: all the classes benefited from handouts including maps, diagrams, and pictures on such topics as US Army persecution of the Mormons, the structure of Roman baths, and Mme Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society.

Let me admit that this was as much a challenge for me as it was for the students. Almost at once some students--particularly commuters and older students--complained that they could not get to a lab often enough to do what I was asking. And though I took groups who needed more help into labs for additional practice, a vocal minority complained mightily. "This is a literature class, for God's sake!" one said. "I've spent my entire educational career avoiding technology, and now you want to force me into it!" I also had trouble at times even figuring out how to make things work. In short, I experienced what perhaps leads a number of faculty to resist the engagement with technology in their classrooms.

There are perhaps some "Luddites" on campus who are chucking in glee at this point. They are possibly saying, "Even if I wanted to use Netscape, I don't have the time to learn. I'm quite busy enough, thank you, with the work that really needs doing in my classes. Besides, my classes are working well enough the traditional way."

Yet, I would suggest that in the coming decade it will be impossible to ignore or avoid the demands of technology in the classroom. Some businesses are already asking for résumés on the applicant's personal Web page, and WCU graduates have reported that use of the Internet is the one area most expected by their employers. If we refuse to learn and use these technologies we will not be able to help our students prepare for life after graduation. Certainly there is nothing magical about technology but it is very powerful and teachers need to learn how to harness that power. But in order to encourage students to expect more of themselves, we must show the way by doing more ourselves with the technologies available to us on campus. When we accept the challenge of something new and difficult we are perhaps put back into the position students are put into most of the time. We are no longer the "master." We are no longer in complete control. And it can be uncomfortable. But perhaps it's beneficial for us to feel this way from time to time.

In each class we teach we should help the class learn how to use presentation software and how to create Web pages. In order to do this, of course, we must learn PowerPoint and Netscape ourselves, create our own Web pages, and practice integrating graphics into our

handouts. As a consolation, we can use students as peer instructors because some know more than we do. We simply make it clear that (1) we see the skills as necessary, and (2) we will permit ourselves to be seen by our own students at times as learners, not always as “experts.” I challenge all WCU faculty to push students to expect more of themselves (and of us) and to do more with the technologies available to us on campus. Students can do some wonderful things, but we need to help them raise this particular bar.

For examples of such pages, see any of the following:

<http://www.wcu.edu/english/brian/johanna.html>

<http://www.wcu.edu/eberly/steve/courses/479.html>

<http://www.wcu.edu/eberly/steve/courses/496.html>

<http://www.wcu.edu/eberly/steve/courses/697.html>

Steve Eberly, English

If you would like to **respond** to Steve's opinion piece, please send your responses **BY THE 8th OF JANUARY** to Terry Nienhuis at the Faculty Center. Your response will appear in the January 15 issue of notes & quotes.