

Building a Web Site in an ABE Class

Building a web site allowed everyone to demonstrate their skills

Maura Donnelly

In the spring of 1999, my class and I created a web page (<http://hub1.worlded.org/docs/qb/default.htm>). The verb "create" is a bit misleading. We argued, designed, wrote, rewrote, and wrote again, fought, laughed, explored, compared, criticized, and finally gave birth to our web site, which some of us still fuss over like new parents and of which all of us are tremendously proud. I say this because I want to avoid giving the impression that this project was a breeze. I want to avoid generating in readers the feelings of self-doubt that I experience when I learn about innovative projects and best practices that seem to come off without a hitch. It is from hitches that I learn about my students and about myself as a teacher. So, while creating a web page was not easy, it was a memorable and creative learning experience for me and for my students.

Who We Are

Our class was located at the Adult Learning Center, LaGuardia Community College, in Queens, NY. The students were members of the local community who came to the center to improve their reading, writing, math, and English skills and get their GED certificates. LaGuardia offers four levels of pre-GED classes that lead up to actual GED preparation classes. Our class was the second level within this four-level system. The overall pedagogical goal of the class was to provide opportunities for the learners to successfully interact with and create written texts. Our work focused on reading for meaning; tracing character development and motivation in fiction; identifying and understanding the roles of nouns, verbs, and adjectives; deconstructing and understanding sentence structure and consequential changes in meaning; creating sentences of varying length and structure; and writing descriptive, narrative, and personal stories. In addition to our web project, we were reading poetry and fiction and developed a relationship with an author.

Eighteen different languages were spoken in our class of 20 learners. The 17 students who had not been born in the United States had been here anywhere from six months to 20 years. The age range in the class was from 19 to 58. Most of the students worked. Most cited attaining a GED as their goal.

The class met for nine hours a week, of which one-and-a-half hours a week were spent in the computer lab. The results of a poll asking about their expectations for the class, their personal goals, and their interests showed that interest in "learning computers" was overwhelming. The students had widely varying levels of comfort and familiarity with computers and with the Internet. Some students frequently used computers, already had e-mail accounts, and were adept at surfing the Web.

The Project

The aim of our work in the lab was to motivate and encourage the students to write and write some more. After everyone mastered basic computer techniques, we quickly moved on to word processing and writing. Students created first drafts of their personal stories on the computer, revised and edited them, and designed texts using various font styles, sizes and colors and clip art. Depending on the student, this process took one or many sessions. During this time, the students signed up for their own e-mail accounts and I began to e-mail their assignments to them each week.

Students were e-mailing each other and me at an alarming rate. I received numerous e-mails not related to assignments, and held many ongoing dialogues with students via e-mail. After we had been

using the computer lab for four months, I introduced the idea of a virtual school visit project (<http://www.otan.dni.us/webfarm/emailproject/school.htm>) as a natural way to continue and extend this engagement in writing. In a virtual school visit, two classes come together to be key pals, the term used for electronic pen pals. Every type of class (adult literacy, ESOL, K-12, and GED) from anywhere in the world is invited to participate. The participating students exchange e-mails and eventually each class creates a web site that is framed as a tour of their school for their partner class.

The structure of this project was ideal for my students. First of all, to communicate across a distance using writing was new for them. They did not generally write letters. While some students were already using e-mail to communicate with people outside of our class, this gave every student the opportunity to develop a relationship with someone simply using words. They loved the idea of having key pals and talked about what they wanted to learn from a class in California. Secondly, the prospect of creating a web site, while daunting at first, intrigued many of the students. We had been using the Internet to do research during the year and we had looked at some student-created sites.

As a group we discussed what would be involved in building a site, what we might want to have on our site, and any reservations we had about making the site. After a week we put the idea to a vote and the class decided to participate in the project.

Getting Started

We started with key pals. Our partner was a class of six ESOL students in California who spoke Spanish as their first language. Much of our work was done in the classroom. We brainstormed what we wanted to know about our Californian key pal class and what we wanted to tell them about us. Because of the disparity in class size, groups of my students each partnered with one of the California students. My students wrote their first e-mail as groups in class and the next time we went to the computer lab one from each group typed it in and sent it off. The students, who earlier had rejected letter writing, were excited about crafting good letters and anxiously awaited their partners' responses. By the next week, the California students had responded and the communication was underway.

We began to explore the possibilities of creating our own web site. We used a focusing question to guide us: "If our key pals were coming to visit, what would we show them?" First we talked about the level of detail we would show. Were we talking about a visit to our school, our class, our city, our borough, or our homes? Some students wanted to show their homes, family, friends, and workplaces. Others wanted to show pictures of our class, our computer lab, and include examples of our writing. Still others wanted to show the visitors New York City and especially our borough, Queens. We had much discussion about this; the students' individual pages reflect this diversity of thought.

Much of the actual work for the web site took place in our classroom, not in the computer lab. We wrote about and discussed what we wanted on our site and then worked on particular pages. Once we had decided on some basic components of the site - a first page, individual pages, e-mail with our key pals, local landmarks, and our school and class - we set about designing the site. This design work included the aesthetics of the site as well as its navigation and flow.

This last component, the flow, was possibly the most difficult aspect for students. We placed ourselves in the mind of the visitor and, with all of the components of the site on the black board, we asked: "Where would I go next?"

A large part of this design process was critiquing other web sites; mostly those made by or for adult learners (<http://members.aol.com/ansongreen/tour.htm>, <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/1064/>, <http://home.earthlink.net/~sgaer/home.htm>).

I e-mailed URLs to the students and asked them to review the web sites based for the strengths of their design. We used these questions to frame their analysis

- _ Is it easy to move around this site?
- _ What do you think of the background color and the color of the fonts?
- _ Can you read this easily?
- _ Do you like the use of pictures?
- _ What would you change about this site?
- _ What about this site do you think we should try to include in our site?

Working individually or in pairs, students reviewed the sites with one of these questions in mind and e-mailed their thoughts to me. Students were generally able to assess and critique other sites, given these focus questions. Without any such guiding questions, students often wrote back that they liked or did not like a site or that they thought a site was nice.

Students were adamant about having pictures on the site. Disposable cameras allowed the students to carry cameras with them and snap pictures as they went about their lives. I received a mini-grant to cover the cost of the disposable cameras and processing. The students had to pick four or five shots each to put on their individual pages and write captions for their pictures. This short writing task proved to be relatively easy; it was writing about something with which they were connected. The captions were a fun break from the longer pieces of writing they were creating for the site.

A Hitch

We had all of the raw stock for the site: photos, original student writing in the form of captions, introductions, short pieces created during the year, each student's end of the year writing celebration piece, and our e-mail conversations with our key pals. We were ready to put together our site. My vision was that after a brief tutorial on Front Page, a web editor that allows the user to simply drag and drop images and text onto a page and easily arrange them, each student and I would work together and create each student's page. I blocked out a total of three hours to do this work. This did work with students who had all of their components ready, but it took much longer than I planned. In the end, only a few students were able to lay out their own pages. As students were still handing in their chosen photographs and their final writing on the last days of class, I did the remainder of the layout after the end of the term. This led to hours of extra work for me.

I was a bit disappointed because not only did I not enjoy doing this extra work but I also wanted the site to be up and finished by the end of the term so we could celebrate it as a class. Although I notified all of the students when the site went up, I feel there was no true group closure on the project. And because some of the layout occurred without their involvement, I questioned, to some degree, the students' true ownership of the project.

Issues

Because LaGuardia operates on a three-term system, seven new students were introduced into the class in April, 1999. We had to stop our process for two class meetings and focus on welcoming these students and introducing them to the project. Once they were involved, the newer students had as much influence on the course of the project as anyone else in the room.

This brings up a point about the potential tension between a classroom project of any length and the often transient nature of the adult literacy classroom. Students were participating in the class and

consequently in this project to varying degrees. Some students have completed individual pages with their own captioned photographs, original writing, and a link to their reading in our end of the year writing celebration. Others only have a picture of themselves with an introduction of a few sentences. Their pages reflect their abilities, during that time period, to participate in the class and in this project.

The purpose of this project was not to make my students into web designers but rather to encourage them to write and give them a vehicle for publishing this writing. This said, many students were also interested in learning about computers in general and wanted to be involved in all aspects of the project, including the more technical ones. Therefore, some of my time was spent exploring technology for technology's sake with interested students while the other students worked on their personal writing or design aspects of the site. I was highly conscious during this time to not let the allure of technology overwhelm the true goal of writing but rather to use this allure to motivate students to read, research, and write.

Rewards

One of the goals of this class was to give students successful and engaging experiences with text. Many of the students did not view themselves as effective readers and writers. They saw interacting with text as a hard struggle and certainly not something that could be fun and rewarding. During this project, students read and assessed other web sites, read and peer-revised each other's writing, and used writing and e-mail to communicate their ideas and thoughts. All of this literacy work was done for a purpose the students had decided upon, designed, and implemented.

The creation of this web site is, for me, an example of a project-based learning activity. In project based learning, students and teacher work together to explore a topic and create a product. The complexity of this project demanded various skills and strengths: writing, humor, linear and nonlinear thinking, leadership, research, an understanding of the World Wide Web, consensus building, e-mail, critical thinking, photography, and all aspects of design; and students were given the opportunity to share their talents. We all took on the roles of expert and novice, apprentice and master.

This collaborative and dynamic environment allowed students to use their strengths as a foundation for their learning. Students were comfortable sharing their writing with the class and participating in peer revision and critique. This environment also allowed me to truly take on the role of facilitator. I was not the keeper of all of the knowledge in the room; I became one of a rotating group of teachers.

The site, while not a current project, is still a fluid, changing entity, which continues to act as a catalyst for student writing and pride. Once the students were able to take a look at the site, many wanted to make changes. Some planned to bring in a new picture, or they wanted to add captions to their pictures. Students often contact me at school or via e-mail about the site. In addition to my pedagogical goals of having my students successfully interact with text and engage in more writing, one unexpected outcome of this site is that it allowed the community of our class to continue. This community now has a life that is not bound by our classroom. We are a group of people who struggled to create something of which we are proud and that will continue to connect us.

About the Author

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Summarized by Bella Hanson. This page is located at: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=298>