

**Looking Backward, Bringing Forward:
Web-Based Archival Analysis and Presentation in a First-Year Writing Classroom
Final Report**

Davidson College

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The Grant Project was conducted during the Fall semester 2001. Goals for the project included having students 1) learn to synthesize disparate, sometimes contradictory source materials; 2) discover how a non-linear web-based presentation affords a more complex understanding of cause/effect than that offered by a traditional print-based presentation of research; 3) learn specific computer skills for creating web pages; 4) understand the nature of primary documents and issues related to their use.

To complete the project, three members of the grant team (Shireen Campbell, Kristen Eshleman, and Jan Blodgett) taught classes related to critical thinking and writing skills, web page design, and archives. In addition, the student member of the team, JiHoon Hahn, met with students individually to assist with web page implementation. Project funds provided the salary for the student assistance.

The completed web pages were added to the College Archives web page (<http://www.davidson.edu/administrative/library/archives/ENG101/index.htm>). Notices of the page were sent to various listservs. As a part of the Archives page, the student pages became a part of the North Carolina ECHO project, a state-wide portal for access to historical records, exhibits, and collections.

The Grant Team attended the ACS Information Fluency Symposium in February 2002 and presented a poster session on the project. The session was well received and additional requests for information have been received and answered since the meeting.

Expense Report

Time and payroll for JiHoon Hwang

70 hours

Gross	\$700.00
Fica Expense	\$43.40
Medicare	10.15

Summary Reports

Critical Thinking Skills for Information Fluency

Goals

The critical thinking component of the project focused on helping students learn how to synthesize disparate, sometimes contradictory source materials. We spent time in class both answering specific group questions and discussing how to adjudicate between conflicting sources. For example, we considered questions such as what should one do when two first-hand accounts presented radically different views of the same event?

Another strong project emphasis was to encourage students to discover how a non-linear web-based presentation affords a more complex understanding of cause/effect than that offered by a traditional print-based presentation of research. To this end, we devoted one workshop to assessing similar web projects. The class also discussed several times the range of possible structures for student projects and considered how differing structural choices might change project emphasis, even when the information conveyed was identical.

Results

Required research logs and final projects showed mixed success in working through discrepancies in source materials. Some groups worked with this fact and explored it in their introductory comments, while other groups ignored contradictions or failed to investigate why these might exist and what these contradictions might mean. **As the final web pages demonstrate, student understanding of events generally became complex. Group projects demonstrate that the effects of an event can be mixed and far-reaching, as well as tangible and intangible. Similarly, groups perceived that often predicated and actual effects differ considerably. Finally, their projects expose the various ways an issue can divide an academic community into smaller constituencies.**

Assessing the extent to which their experience in working on this project improved student understanding of the benefits of a non-linear presentation is difficult. Our results seem inconclusive: in their project evaluations, students unanimously say this goal was met, but not how it was met.

Issues to Consider

Cost vs. benefit: without considerable hands-on support from our student technical assistant, this project would not have been possible. Can/should your institution justify the course specific expense?

Assessment: as our discussion of goals and results reveals, assessing the success of this type of assignment requires not only careful articulation of goals but also thorough advance consideration of how those goals can be assessed

Purpose: students were told from the beginning of the assignment that their web pages would be published on the college web site and available to the broader community beyond our institution. Not all the projects, however, generated sites that seem worthy of publication. What our experience suggests is that a specific pedagogic goal (providing the students with a sense of an authentic audience and purpose) may conflict with specific institutional goals (offering stellar examples of student work to the public for public relations and development purposes). Before beginning such a project, these issues need consideration.

Computer Literacy for Information Fluency

Goals

Continuing with the team-taught approach to information fluency, we devised a successful method for strengthening the students' technical skills. We focused on the computer skills that are most relevant to this project and that can be incorporated effectively in a short period of time. In two weeks, students had the skills to structure, develop, and design their own unique group websites containing original essays, bibliographies, electronic documents, digital images, digital audio, and internal and external hyperlinks.

We started with one hands-on class session dedicated to learning basic web authoring skills using Microsoft FrontPage 2000. We chose FrontPage because of its ease of use and availability in each of the student computing labs. We also offered computer-based tutorials for FrontPage as a supplement. The basics we covered are listed below:

- Launch FrontPage
- Tour of the screen
- Online Help
- Open a new page
- Add, change or delete text
- Add, change or delete image
- Add links
- Normal, HTML & Preview tabs
- Background color and themes
- Site and Page Views
- Browser Compatibility
- Save your work

Armed with the basics of web authoring, students began group work on their own. To facilitate their efforts, we used \$700 from the grant fund to hire JiHoon Hwang, an instructional technology student consultant for 70 hours of work. Over a 5-day period, students were encouraged to sign up for 2-hour blocks of time for one-on-one support with JiHoon. Support included FrontPage functionality, best practices for scanning documents and digitizing images, and site structure. In addition, the student consultant assisted instructional technology in developing a project homepage, and testing each group's completed website for browser compatibility, structural inconsistencies, and broken links before combining all group sites into a single project website.

Results

The basics class was a good introduction to web authoring in FrontPage. Because the class was spaced one week before the group consultations, many students had forgotten some of what they had learned in that hour. In retrospect, a smaller interval between that class and group consultation would have been more effective. Although we offered the supplemental tutorials, we did not get any requests. Instead, the students took full advantage of the one-on-one support sessions with our student consultant. For many reasons, this was the most effective part of our program for computer literacy. First and foremost, having a student consultant meant we could offer support during “student hours.” Additionally, as with most computer training, customized individual training is more efficient and usually results in higher retention. Overall, we think the method we chose worked very well for this project, and the student evaluations echoed that sentiment.

Information Literacy for Information Fluency

Goals

The archival component of the project focused on helping students to understand the nature of primary documents and issues related to their use. In completing the project, students learned how to search the archives database, how to evaluate content and provenance of documents, and how to appropriately cite materials. They also became aware of rules relating to archives and copyright issues. Additionally, the students analyzed archives web sites and developed standards for appropriate presentation of archival research.

The students were introduced to archival research through a class session that allowed them to have hands on experience with files, showed them the archives search engine and database, and provided information on rules for handling archival materials. Much of the learning was done as the students pursued their research -with theory becoming practice. Faced with boxes of materials, they learned to scan files and to identify pertinent records. They learned to think creatively about sources and gained an understanding of how events can be documented. They also worked with selecting documents to appropriately illustrate their research--a task which required balancing information, visual interest and copyright limitations.

A second class session centered on evaluating similar web projects. Students compared several sites, discussed what worked and what detracted from scholarly projects. By developing their own standards, students were able to identify more clearly how presentation influences authority and voice.

Results

The majority of the students gained a clear understanding of how archival research varies from research using secondary sources and also how the kinds of questions asked to evaluate primary sources can be used for secondary sources as well. With first year students and a limited time frame, there is a tension between how much

material is provided by the archivist up front and how much material the students are required to find on their own using the archives finding aids. Successful use of the archives varied with some groups making full use of archival sources, while others stopped researching too soon. In terms of the production of viable scholarly web pages, particularly given the short time frame, the students managed to produce web pages that combined information and visual design with a fair level of sophistication. These pages both allow for increased awareness of archives holdings and provide a model for archives projects in other disciplines.

