A Luddite in Cyberland, Or How to Avoid Being Snared by the Web

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Advocates of the World Wide Web speak in glowing terms of its ability to provide greater access to information resources and to promote active reading and learning. Furthermore, students are now encouraged to construct Web pages, using hypertext as an alternative to traditional linear written documents. Although the ability to navigate the Web and to construct Web pages is not without merit, instructors who emphasize these skills are likely to sacrifice the stated objectives of most composition programs: to help students learn to write clear, coherent prose, to read critically and analytically, and to conduct meaningful research.

Most of us who teach composition are aware of the dramatic effect student access to the World Wide Web has had on their research procedures. Students who might have thought, even a decade ago, that the most natural way to begin a research project was to stroll across campus to the library, are now unlikely to leave their room to begin their search. The advantages of the Web over traditional library research are obvious and compelling. Not only do Web resources make it unnecessary to hunt through stacks of books or volumes of old periodicals, they simplify notetaking and the mechanics of data collection. Even if the search eventually leads to the library, most of us—students and faculty—will begin a bibliographic search on the computer in our rooms or offices.

Given the paradigmatic changes taking place in research strategies and information retrieval, it is no wonder many have spoken glowingly of the benefits of the Web for the teaching of composition. Textbooks and ancillaries related to Internet research seem to arrive at my office daily with titles such as Research and Documentation in an Electronic Age (Hacker, 1998); Writing Research Papers: Investigating Resources in Cyberspace (Woodward, 1997); English on the Internet (Stull, 1997); and The Online Student: Making the grade on the Internet (Reddick & King, 1996). A recent history of computers and writing reflects a general optimism about increased access to Internet resources:

Teachers and students with access to the Internet find themselves delighted, or overwhelmed, by the information available to them on the World Wide Web—an ability to connect with databases...
and people—sources that have revolutionized the process leading to the research paper. (Hawisher, LeBlanc, Moran, & Selfe, 1996, pp. 7–8)

Of course, not every revolution has salutary effects. Some complain that something has been lost in the process of moving from traditional library research to online searches. We are aware, I think, of how symbolic changes can have enormous psychological effects—the corner office, the high rise condominium, the table with a view are all examples of the symbolic significance of location. Similarly, the physical structure of the library was a tangible metaphor for the importance of knowledge itself, just as an enormous stadium speak volumes about the place of athletics in our society. Entering the almost sanctified halls of the library (“No talking, please!”) and walking along the rows of books, one felt some sense of the immensity of accumulated knowledge and the indebtedness to past scholars. When the grandeur of the library is reduced to a 15-inch monitor, when Plato is just another “hit” on a Net search, when the palpability of print becomes an ephemeral image on a screen, some scholars may feel an almost aesthetic deterioration in our research methods. What of the serendipitous discovery of a great book, found as we were roving the stacks in search of something else? What of the statement made by rich bindings and marbled end pages about the importance of great books to our society? What of the value given a book by virtue of the physical journey—up the stairs and along the aisles—to gain the holy grail of knowledge? Such arguments, however, are better reserved to the antiquarians. The demands of efficiency and productivity surely speak in favor of the Web.

However, even the argument of productivity deserves further examination. Searching on the Web certainly does possess some advantages over traditional library searches. All of us have been frustrated in the library when we discover that a book or an index we desire is missing, that articles have been neatly excised from their bindings with a razor blade, that works have been erroneously shelved, and, thus, lost for a generation or so. Books deteriorate with age; ink fades, the crisp white sheets turn yellow, pages fall from their bindings, everything grows brittle and fragile to the touch. Sometimes the “palpability of print” is rapidly on its way to becoming the insubstantiality of dust. Books are subject to the action of time and fate—fires, flood, worms, and mold. How can such works compete with the eternal youth of the electronic image?

But, such arguments presume that the resources in the library are equally available on the Web. Of course, this is far from the case. Although libraries of great books are being converted to electronic archives, only a fraction of printed books are available in electronic form. Many important journals are unavailable in online versions, and, given the economics of publishing, seem to feel no compulsion to change to an electronic format. Even campus newsletters are still being published in print form because the arrival of a printed document in the mail is thought to gain more attention than the appearance of an item on a Web site. For the immediate future, at least, students who do not seek out printed materials at a library have greatly limited their access to information.

One of the most obvious deficiencies in research strategies for students in my classes has been in the use of Infotrac, the principal source of online publication information for our campus. Entries in Infotrac appear in three forms: bibliography, annotated bibliography, and bibliography with full text of the article. The students have—despite my warnings and protestations—limited their use of these sources to those appearing with full text. Superior articles with important information may be readily available within the
bound volumes of periodicals, but students, addicted to the ease of online searches, seldom make the additional effort to seek out texts not available in electronic form.

Of course, Infotrac is a Bostonian parlor compared to the Wild West of the Web. Unlike Infotrac, there is no standard method of indexing the Web, no assurance as to the legitimacy (or even continued existence) of indexed materials, and no editorial review of a Web page’s content. A recognizable search term in a standard index may miss the relevant Web sites. More commonly, the academic search may be impeded with dozens of completely irrelevant “hits.” For instance, I recently searched for the term cloning using a popular Web search engine. The first list of Web sites were all e-mail postings with titles such as “From Corned Beef to Cloning” and “Cloning is Crap.” But, my favorite site was the “Jesus Cloning Services” that offered to sell DNA samples from the Shroud of Turin so that buyers could clone their own Jesus. Such sites are amusing, but hardly the stuff of serious research.

Virtually, every professor I’ve encountered at professional meetings has confirmed how rapidly the change—some would say disintegration—has been in student research papers. Even with the best guidance from professors, students too often settle for inferior sources. As a New Jersey professor noted in a Chronicle of Higher Education article,

> Instead of books that you have to check out of the library, read carefully, understand, synthesize, and then tactfully excerpt, these sources are quips, blips, pictures, and short summaries that may be downloaded magically to the dorm-room computer screen. (Rothenberg, 1997, p. A44)

Even when the information available on the Web is accurate and significant, the act of reading a Web document is different from the act of reading a traditional print text. In defending the recent preoccupation with Internet-based technology, the president of Harvard University has extolled the “active” learning of students using Internet resources: “Seated before a computer, a student is challenged to make something happen, to act or pursue, rather than merely react or absorb” (Rudenstine, 1997, p. A48). However, many faculty who have observed students in laboratory settings, may find Rudenstine’s comments deeply ironic. It is possible to “act” continuously on the Web without absorbing anything. Reading a Web document is to traditional print reading what channel surfing is to watching a documentary film. Most students who use the Web regularly expect to read small fragments of text that can be easily scanned and dismissed. If observed in a lab setting, the computer mouse is in almost constant motion as students scroll, select, link, and load. When a vendor for a Web-based student information system appeared on our campus, she told us that the instructions on each Web page had been intentionally limited to what could be read in less than a minute in order to be “student-friendly.” Their research indicated that students would simply skip over remaining text, if it exceeded the 60-second barrier. Even the prevailing metaphor for a Web document, the “page,” suggests a brevity of content. One does not hear of Web “chapters” or Web “books.” I have, in fact, despite repeated inquiries, never met anyone who has actually read a book on the Web. In an age where the attention span of students is already undermined by television and its rapidly changing images, the advent of a form of reading approached at the pace of a music video cannot be hailed as an advance for education.

Furthermore, the nonlinearity of the reading experience, the widely acclaimed hypertext, undermines logical patterns of reading and thinking. The linearity of a written text is not a limitation, it is its glory. The writer has taken the chaotic experience of ordinary
existence and imposed order upon it—whether in the form of a Henry James novel or a

treatise on genetics. No one needs to teach students to jump in random order from one
“tickler” to the next. What students do need to learn is how to spend an hour or two in

conscorted thought as they engage a work of complexity and depth.

In many ways, we are only beginning to understand the effects of the Web on the
cognitive habits of students. But, the revolutionary effects claimed by supporters of
Web-based classes may be the most powerful argument against wholesale adoption of this
approach. Early experiments with radioactive isotopes left a crippling legacy to those
researchers who did not fully understand the power of these substances. If such a
comparison seems hyperbolic, consider a recently released Carnegie Mellon study that
linked increased Internet use with greater detachment from family, fewer personal
friendships, and greater depression and loneliness (Kraut et al., 1998). In addition to the
social consequences of Web use, we are only beginning to see what will be the cognitive
legacy of a generation enamored with the computer. In a *Chronicle of Higher Education*
article, Hubert L. Dreyfus, professor of philosophy at the University of California-
Berkeley, has expressed serious reservations about the effect of the Internet on students’
scholastic achievements: “Without some way of telling the relevant from the irrelevant
and the significant from the insignificant, everything becomes equally interesting and

The question of how the Web affects reading may be supplanted by an even more


crucial question for composition programs: Should students be asked to use the Web as a
place of publication for their own work? One can immediately see many advantages to
using the Web as a site of production. If we are preparing students for the writing demands
they will face in the real world, creation and maintenance of a Web site may be one of the
more practical skills they can learn. Furthermore, the graphical nature of the Web
encourages students to see text as one of the tools they have for communicating. And, it
also encourages them to add visual elements—pictures, maps, tables—and to understand
the important role these elements play in documentation.

Publishing on the Web may also be a motivational factor for many students who enjoy
the challenge of working in a new medium. And, faculty often report that their teaching
has been reinvigorated as they explore new technology. Finally, having student work
stored on the Web provides a rich environment for evaluating the progress of individual
students and for course and program evaluations. Webfolios are certainly less awkward to
maintain than file cabinets filled with student papers collected in print form. There are
clearly many advantages to the Web-based class.

However, the use of the Web as a site for student production cannot be seen as simply
a new technological wrinkle in a traditional composition course. The shift to a Web-based
class requires a fundamental change in the approach to the course. In many ways the
change is comparable to the difference between print news and television news broadcasts.

Television news emphasizes the visual; print news emphasizes the ideational. Television
news gives greater priority to immediacy; print news gives greater priority to significance.
Television news stresses the event; print news stresses the analysis. Simply put, television
news has more glitz and less substance. Similarly, students producing Web sites typically
neglect content to focus on the method of delivery.

In scanning student Web sites produced in various academic programs around the
country, it is immediately apparent that students’ time had been consumed with learning
how to write code for Web pages, searching for and importing graphics, and creating links to other sites. The student Web page quoted below is typical of the quality of writing found in most of the ones I read:

MY web page, not your web page.
See? I’m possessive even when I am not present. Hi, how are you? Welcome to my page this is [student’s name] in case you were a little uncertain. I hope you enjoy my page because I’m not too sure how it will come out. I wouldn’t say I am computer illiterate but as close as you can come to it.

As this quotation demonstrates, the quality of writing in my search was often abominable. In most cases, there was relatively little text worth evaluating on the Web site. Despite the supposedly vast resources of the Web, most students showed little use of research—traditional or Web-based. When research was used, it was typically an elementary summary drawn from an encyclopedic reference:

Smoking and it’s Dangers to the Human Body
The dangers of smoking are countless. Recently a cigarette company openly admitted that tobacco causes various types of cancer and other harmful effects to the human body. Also medical evidence had proven that mouth and lung cancer can in most cases be attributed to smoking pipes, cigars, cigarettes, or even smokeless tobacco use. Also smoking can cause chronic bronchitis, emphysema, and various cardiovascular diseases. Cigarettes can also be directly attributed to some cases of cancers of the bladder, pancreas, lung, esophagus, and mouth. In 1990, the United States Surgeon General was quoted in saying “smoking represents the most extensively documented cause of disease ever investigated in the history of biomedical research.” One of the main problems that cigarettes bring is that although many people who smoke know that it may or most likely will kill them eventually they cannot quit. That is because their bodies are addicted to the nicotine in the cigarettes. Only in recent years have their been products on the market that help ween your body off the nicotine, such as nicotrol or nicoderm.

In other cases, sources had clearly been plagiarized. In short, most such sites were an embarrassment to the student and the university.

Of course, the same complaints about surface errors, lack of research, and plagiarized sources could be leveled at traditional first-year composition students. One can certainly find polished research papers on the Web (indeed, one can buy them!) The point is not that one can find examples of bad writing on the Web, but that the medium helps form (or deform) the message. Even if student Web pages did not exhibit the glaring problems so common now, the time spent on student Web-site production would still be a distraction from the real purpose of the composition classroom. Our dilemma with regard to Web page production is remarkably similar to the grammar issue that divided the profession a generation ago. Obviously, a knowledge of grammar is a good thing, but study after study indicated that grammar instruction had no significant impact on improvement in student writing (Hartwell, 1990). Similarly, knowing how to produce a Web page is a useful skill, but there is no indication that it will improve a student’s ability to write. Indeed, no research has shown that computer instruction of any kind will result in better student writing (Wahlstrom & Selfe, 1994). Learning the mechanics of Web-page production is not a bad thing in itself, but it will not achieve the basic goals of the composition course.

Furthermore, most composition instructors know little about the mechanics of Web-page production or the principles of Web-page design. Real expertise in document design is possessed by a small vanguard of technical writing instructors, and even they are just coming to grips with the implication of Web documents. As Karen Schriver (1997) noted:
Although there are now dozens of cookbooks on everything from designing home pages to managing your GIFs and JPEGs, there are almost no books that present empirical evidence about how people read and interpret what they encounter on the Web. Without an understanding of what people do, books that claim to provide design strategies about what people need or want are merely armchair speculation. (p. 390)

When even the experts are unclear about the criteria for a successful Web site, it would be sheer hubris for most composition faculty to teach Web-page design.

One often hears that the potential for the Web is great. And, I would agree. The Web has the potential to sacrifice the quality of sources used by students in research for the ready availability of Web sources. It has the potential to distract students away from the analysis and reflection at the heart of a college education as they focus on the superficial appearance of documents. It has the potential to squander the precious resource of student time by focusing on the mechanics of Web-site production instead of on the act of writing. We may be able to avoid the Siren call of the Web as we avoided the false promises of televised classes in the 1960s and computer tutorials in the 1970s. With a little luck, the Web may never be able to reach its potential.

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