Technology and Teaching: Where are we? Where are we going? How do we get there?

Web Pages and Teaching
James Lochtefeld
Carthage College

OVERVIEW

In the beginning, I had a hard drive. I used my computer to translate texts to use in class, and I wrote some introductory texts of my own. I stored these texts on my hard drive, and when the need came, I printed them out and made copies for students. And it was good.

Then, I had e-mail. Instead of printing texts, having them copied, and handing them out, I sent them to students by e-mail. E-mail needed less lead time than copying, which was very good, but it still required timely planning, not to mention students keeping their mailboxes empty, both of which were not always very good.

So in January 1997, I made a web page. It is always available (presuming the network is running), it can be updated at will, and it is seemingly easy for students to find and use. It was good then, and it is still good.

The allusions here to Genesis 1 are not just because I teach religion, but also because there are parallels between these two creative acts. Just as Genesis describes creation as a step-by-step process, in the same way my web page gradually took form. I didn't create it all at once—now, that task would be overwhelming—but instead built it page by page, which I'm convinced is the only way to do this on one's own.

The web page began, simply enough, with course materials stored on my hard drive, and at first I didn't use it very effectively. My first web syllabus (Islam, Spring 1997) was essentially identical to my hard copy, with no active links. In mid-fall 1997 (East Asian Religion) I realized I could link my site to other websites, and that semester such links were mainly to images. In 1998-1999 (Buddhism and Hinduism) I worked on using more electronic texts (some of which came from my web page), a trend also visible in a regularly offered introductory course (Religion 100), which last semester had on-line reading about one day out of every three.

USES

Although the web page does have some pictures of my children (as a way to help show students who I "am"), I have always seen its primary function as pedagogical—to provide resources for students and for myself. One way it has done this has been through on-line readings, which have given me much greater range, especially for primary texts. I can assign the introduction to the *Kama Sutra*, or the *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammed, without having to go through the entire text (or making students buy it). Needless to say, on-line readings have to be evaluated for veracity and utility, but this isn't much different from what I do with printed texts. When students are carefully prepared, even less "objective" texts can be pedagogically useful—for instance, in having students see how different writers "spin" the same textual sources (e.g., on women in Islam) to further their differing agendas.

Another bonus has been greater accessibility to images. Web links can give students access to anything from Shingon Buddhist Mandalas (www.asunam.com/mandara_worlds.htm) to Arabic Calligraphy (www.islamicart.com/main/calligraphy/styles/index.htm). I am also (gradually) creating on-line galleries from my own pictures. These images can either be viewed on a computer by individual students, or they can be projected in the classroom. In some ways, this latter use simply replaces an older technology (the slide projector) with a newer one, but the new technology has several advantages: there's no longer any risk of damaging my slides, I save time by not having to arrange slides and put them away, and I can intersperse my own pictures with ones drawn from outside sites. So far I've done galleries relating to Hinduism and Islam, and will put one together this summer for a Buddhism class next fall.

Using a web page has dramatically reduced the amount of paper that I hand out to students. Two years ago my class syllabi were fifteen pages long, but now they are down to four: a printed version of the home page for that particular class, which appears just as students will see it on the web, my criteria for grading (which I want them to see in hard copy), and a copy of the reading list (which they will use often enough that I feel I should give it to them). This arrangement does make students responsible for knowing the site, but I believe in giving students responsibility. Having the syllabus on the web has also allowed me to post additional resources for students, such as an academic honesty section with concrete examples of plagiarism (www.carthage.edu/~lochtefe/plagiarism.html), to which I refer while discussing plagiarism in class. These expanded resources also means that I can be stricter in my demands and expectations.

Another web page benefit is publicity, such as for my January 1999 trip to India (www.carthage.edu/~lochtefe/

indiajterm.html). The web pages for this trip included a daily itinerary, and links to pictures of the places we would visit. After we got back I asked the students to write reviews of the trip, and I linked these (unedited) testimonials to a group photo. For January 2001 I have made some minor changes, such as adding health-related information, and I've already gotten good response from students, including an e-mail from an incoming student, who would not have known about this otherwise.

TECHNICAL "STUFF"

So how did I learn to do this? I got started by my Classicist colleague, Christine Renaud, who gave me a copy of one web page on a floppy disk, some cheat sheets for HTML language, and who was generous with her time in answering questions. I then began to encode my files, which was tedious and painstaking, but not terribly difficult. The need to know HTML language pretty much disappeared once I began to work in Microsoft Word, since this program will save files in HTML format. I don't bother using a web editing program (e.g., Frontpage), but rather use Word for 95% of my work—cutting and pasting web files is no different from any other file. For intensive work with photos, such as setting up some new pages in the photo gallery, I use Netscape Communicator, in which my limited ability is felicitously matched by my limited objectives. If you want to get started, many colleges offer web page seminars or tutorials, and it also helps to befriend your institution's webmaster.

As with any other computerized venture, everything must be carefully backed up, and the backup kept somewhere else. I nearly learned this the hard way in August 1999, when the server containing my web page essentially blew up, and I didn't have any backup. The computer center managed to recover an older version of the page, but since then I have kept a complete copy in an archive on my hard drive. This archive also gives protection should my website ever get hacked (which hasn't happened yet, but could). A different sort of concern was for my on-line images. After learning how easy it is to take images from the web (and getting requests from honest people for permission to use some of mine), I took the time to learn how to "brand" my photos with my website address, so that people could be led back to my site, wherever the photo appears.

Some features have remained unchanged since the beginning, such as the nine-cell "road map" on the opening page. Most individual pages open with a two-column table, in which there is a photo or image on the left side, and the page's title on the right (this also helps to create a uniform "look"). My original design had the page's table of contents below this opening table, but after I got tired of having to scroll down the page every time, I began putting the table of contents directly under the title in the opening table, where they are immediately accessible. Another change—making a link to my main page part of my standard footer—came after my brother found one of my subsidiary pages, but was unable to get to my home page. Thus the page's form keeps slowly changing, as continued use points out better ways of doing things.

As with any technology, one faces continual choices, as well as the danger of becoming a servant to it. I have consciously decided to keep my site simple—hence the choice of a plain white background, which I like aesthetically, and against which text shows up nicely. Although each subject area has a page of web links, these links get updated every other year, before the course connected with them is offered. Family pictures get changed once a year, at the end of the summer. I could spend much more time doing website maintenance, but I don't want to—as a *sadhu* I knew in India used to say, "It is for me, I am not for it." And it can be for you, too. Please feel free visit the site at www.carthage.edu/~lochtefe/ and to use what will help *you*.

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See page 7 for further details