

## Teaching with the “Ecology of Knowledge” of the Internet

by Gene Thursby

*The following is based on an article about my early work on the World Wide Web that was published in the March 1998 issue of the CLASnotes newsletter from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Florida.*

The Internet marks the beginning of a new "ecology of knowledge" in which the activist slogan "think globally act locally" makes sense. Neither creative thinking nor acting is replaced by automated routines, but each can be augmented by the proper use of networked information sources. For two years, in cooperation with my students, I have been exploring ways to share information across networks. This has required us to adapt old skills and develop new ones – as information consumers, providers, analysts, critics, and visionaries – in the context of the networked environments that are supported by e-mail discussion groups and the World Wide Web.

My interest in the new media came from an unexpected source. I was introduced to them four years ago while on sabbatical leave, thanks to the generosity of a small liberal arts college in Oregon. After returning to Florida, I began to encourage students to join an optional e-mail discussion list that was set up for each of the courses I taught. Managing multiple lists was a challenge, but a rewarding one, because they expanded the extent and range of discussion of issues generated in the classroom and eventually began to generate new questions and perspectives that were brought back into the classroom, too.

In the summer of 1996, when my department was equipped with computers that would support access to the World Wide Web, I began to write files, mark them with basic HTML (Hyper Text Mark-up Language) code so that they would appear as web pages when viewed through software such as Netscape, and save them in file-server directories provided by the college network. My initial interest was local and supplemental – to post information for students enrolled in classes I was teaching, such as syllabi, assignments, paperless handouts, and references to recommended readings.

Although my web pages continue to provide information to currently enrolled students as one of their primary functions, additional possibilities soon presented themselves. When a few folk paintings from India that are part of my small collection were exhibited on campus as a memorial to the late art historian Roy C. Craven in the fall of 1996, I scanned slide pictures of the paintings and set up a "virtual" or online exhibit, too. When a new scholarly journal for study of Hindu tradition invited me to be a member of its editorial board, I volunteered to write and maintain a web page for it. When an e-mail discussion group was established at the University of Connecticut for academic study of mysticism, I invited distant colleagues to advise me in developing a Mysticism Resources Page around which I designed a series of topical reference pages for several areas of Religious Studies, including New Religious Movements. As a result, I was invited to maintain online reference pages for the Mysticism and the New Religious Movements program units of the American Academy of Religion – a large professional society for Religious Studies

Those activities led me to read about the history of the Internet, and I found that Tim Berners Lee who is credited as a creator of its graphical interface (World Wide Web) also established the World Wide Web Virtual Library. The WWW-VL is a distributed project in which many volunteers around the world monitor Internet information resources on topics of their own particular interest, then write and maintain pages of selected and annotated links to relevant online sources. I actively maintain five separate web pages for the WWW-VL within two general areas. For Asian Studies, I serve as virtual librarian for information concerning Pakistan, for the de facto disputed territory of Kashmir, and for the Chinese tradition of Taoism. In the social sciences, I maintain the Social Sciences section and the page for Psychology. In addition, I am a member of an international organizing committee that is preparing a constitution and bylaws for the WWW-VL.

In all this, what serves teaching and research in the our college? Every part of it. The Internet is a vast, rapidly shifting set of information sources. Writing topical resource pages on the World Wide Web not only "puts a good face on it" but – by means of a sustained effort to sift through, survey, and evaluate electronically-networked information – provides a "value added" reference, review, and critique for one's students and colleagues in much the way one would accomplish in an a research paper, an annotated bibliography, or a printed monograph.

In the process of working with networked information sources, one can model for one's students the values inherent in honoring deceased colleagues, cooperating with living ones, and enlarging one's perspectives as a participant in the activities of assessing and utilizing existing forms of knowledge as well as contributing to the production of new ones. These are subjects of interest to students in an undergraduate course I am teaching about Religion on the Internet, and they were topics of concern to several callers when I was a guest last year on a call-in talk radio program in South Africa. After more than an hour of long-distance conversation with my radio host (a woman scholar with a university post), with a creative Black poet, with a worried Afrikaaner grandfather, and with several other people who expressed deep interest in the possibilities and perils of the Internet, it was startling to hear the opening words of a public service radio message that began "Working in a gold mine got you down?" It was also peculiarly fitting.