

The Confluence of E-Book Architectures and Web Anchored Syllabus Construction: New Tricks for Older Pedagogues

Today's liberal arts students, while vastly more familiar with computing and Internet based technologies and services than their teachers, share many of the prejudices and myopic views of their instructors when it comes to adopting emerging platforms that support internet based syllabi and curriculum innovations such as e-books. The predominant learning model practiced by most teachers and students alike is one of pulp and chalk rather than e-books and URL based assignments. In short, students and teachers alike continue to huddle in the safety of traditional learning environments that enable each other to derive relatively low-threat and nominal stress based nominal learning models than embracing technologically supported learning models that encourage risk, have few or no precedents, and which force the instructor to keep at least one or more steps ahead of the students in both the content and delivery dimensions.

Almost immediately after obtaining my PhD in Information Science and Technology I opted to spend time developing my business expertise and honing my newly developed research skills in the business worlds. That "honing period" came to an end this last Fall when I left the Fortune 250 world after almost 25 years of increasing executive level responsibilities in the sales and operations arenas to enter the academic world via a stint as a Visiting Assistant Professor at Whittier College, a small liberal arts college located about 20 miles east of Los Angeles and probably best known to those who had any awareness of the college as it being the alma mater of Richard Nixon.

During my years in the business world I developed and led several marketing, sales and operational teams in the newly evolving and deregulated communications and IT worlds, including teams that developed and implemented several innovative and technologically advanced distance learning and information transfer systems. I spent the summer before formally entering Whittier College to teach a set of business courses (International Business, MIS, and Operations Management) researching the current state of Internet supported business courses and the viability of electronic/e-book technologies.

I made the decision to early on to develop a virtual syllabus for each of my courses that would be available via a dedicated web page at the college's site and to incorporate a combination of customized e-books and support materials that could be changed "on the fly". The remainder of this paper focuses on the lessons learned and going-forth plan to take a relatively new of embryonic technologies and platforms and to apply them in an undergraduate environment where student's had not been challenged to utilize their basic computing skills nor where colleagues were intent on harnessing the most promising technologies to re-define their courses and/or teaching style.

My goals were simplistic when I began the process and the still are today:

- Custom design and utilize e-books that would be content current and incorporate learning aids such as student CDs for concept review and comprehension testing

- Provide these quality and current e-books at price points well below that of equivalent printed texts
- Easily align e-texts (books) with internet based assignments that could be easily changed and updated on the fly
- Provide content feedback to authors to support faster and eventually real-time e-book revisions
- Provide feedback to publishers on what worked and didn't in relation to specific titles and formats
- Align e-books with customized presentation files and supporting materials on the syllabus that would enhance comprehension of the learning goals
- Challenge the students to apply their computing and information gathering skills by providing them with advanced data gathering and presentation skills
- Finally, to use the web based syllabus and associated materials to create a friendly competitive environment within the classroom