

Project Year

2006

Project Team

Jean McGarry, Director of Undergraduate Studies, Writing Seminars, Krieger School of Arts & Sciences;
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Project Title

Writing Seminars Website

Audience

Undergraduate students enrolled in the *Narrative Design* and *Landscape and Setting* classes in the Writing Seminars department

Pedagogical Issue

Professor Jean McGarry's courses have consistently been praised by undergraduates as among their most inspiring experiences in the Writing Seminars. Two courses in particular, *Narrative Design* and *Landscape and Setting*, have helped students hone their craft as fiction writers and critical readers. One of the crucial strengths of these courses is Professor McGarry's extensive preparation of notes, handouts, and other material to bolster her lectures and reinforce the lessons learned in class. She encourages students to engage in active discussion, to send each other ideas outside of class, and to keep their own documentation of their progress throughout the semester. However, the current system for teaching these courses has become outdated. Students are awash in handouts, flooded with emails, and dependent on helpful but limited office hours to communicate with Professor McGarry about their study. The methods of communication between the students and the professor are becoming cumbersome, and need to be rethought.

Solution

These courses could be streamlined by the establishment of comprehensive, media-rich WebCT sites. In a previous semester, provisional sites were created, with discussion boards that students successfully used to circulate short stories and critical responses. Under this grant, we propose to significantly expand these provisional websites with additional online material. The idea is to create a dynamic, portable version of these courses to enhance the writing students' experience, and to viably extend that experience beyond the classroom. With this proposal, the team hopes to build on its initial work to create a comprehensive learning system within WebCT that will allow Professor McGarry to more fully communicate her vision for each course.

Technologies Used

Courseware (WebCT development), HTML/Web Design

Project Abstract

Professor McGarry's *Narrative Design* and *Landscape and Setting* courses could be greatly aided by the establishment of comprehensive, media-rich WebCT sites. This semester, provisional sites were created, with discussion boards that students successfully used to circulate short stories and critical responses. We would like to create a week-by-week guide to the courses via the WebCT site, providing students with a sense of scope for the course, and a starting point for further reflection. With a CER Technology grant, we hope to significantly expand these websites with additional materials. The new content will include the following: syllabi, assignments, lecture notes, additional readings, information about authors, a calendar of events, and photographs and other related artworks. In addition, a comprehensive discussion board will be set up where students can reflect on the material covered and upload their assignments. Roy Blumenfeld, a student in both these Writing Seminars courses and a digital adept, has offered to assist Professor McGarry in building websites and weblogs for these courses. He would begin work after his involvement in the courses had ended, but his experience as a student would enable him to more effectively aid future students in coping with courses that each have a fairly complicated apparatus and many components. For example, *Landscape and Setting* is a reading and writing course, where students examine the uses of description in short stories and memoirs, while they write their own sketches based on photographs, artwork, observation and memory. In the classes, students analyze the literature under study and critique samples of student writing. The course materials include photographs, excerpts from art history and criticism (John Ruskin, Kenneth Clark, Paul Valery, Heinrich Wölfflin), five collections of short stories or memoirs, and assorted other manifestoes on the art of writing description. In *Narrative Design*, we also have more than one thread running through the course. We read seven novels from the golden age of realist writing, tracking the development of design features over time and across national divides. Concurrently, students contribute regularly to an on-going discussion of what realism is, how it applies to the novel, what its inconsistencies are, and what it can achieve in the a form that is both flexible and dynamic. As in *Landscape and Setting*, Professor McGarry tends to generate a lot of designs, timelines, outlines, lists, and other paper handouts, which could become a permanent part of the course website. The establishment of comprehensive WebCT sites for both courses would allow Professor McGarry and the students to more efficiently communicate, ultimately permitting both courses to cover more material in greater depth.