Literature on the Web

A sabbatical provided time to create a long-lived useful Web resource for teaching language arts.

By Nancy Deal

Subject: Language arts, social studies

Audience: Teachers, teacher educators, library media specialists

Grade Levels: 7–12 (Ages 12–18)

Technology: Internet/Web

Standards: *NETS•S* 3–5; *NETS•T* II (www.iste.org/standards). *ELA* 1, 2, 7 (www.ncte.org/standards/standards.html). *NCSS* Curriculum Standards I, III (www.ncss.org/standards).

Many instructors across disciplines and grade levels share a similar concern about technology infusion: the introduction of technology into their courses will distract from or supplant content ("I teach English/math/history, not computers"). Many complain quite legitimately that appropriate Web resources are difficult to find, are not easily adaptable for use in their classrooms, do not suit their methods of teaching, or that, with all the other expectations they must meet, teaching with technology is simply too demanding to attempt.

My own ability to integrate technology into the teaching of English has developed, somewhat painfully at times, after coming from the text-based tradition. I hoped to inspire teachers to use the resources of the Web to extend students' interactions with content in ways traditional approaches cannot offer by creating a focused, efficient-to-use Web-based literature guide. Remembering the Great Depression connects Web materials to online activities designed to supplement the study of selected pieces of U.S. literature set during the Great Depression, specifically *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.* (***Editor's note:*** Find URLs for this and other Web pages mentioned in this article under Resources on p. 59.)

Background

I teach in the English education program in the English Department at Buffalo State College. I was granted a sabbatical for the calendar year 2001 to develop Web resources appropriate for college faculty to integrate into program courses, for preservice teachers to use in preparation and student teaching, and for secondary-level English/language arts (ELA) teachers to use in their classrooms.

I chose to create Web-based literature guides, which are greatly expanded versions of the Schools of California Online Resources for Educators (SCORE) Project Cyberguides. Because my intended audience included teachers and students in secondary ELA classrooms, I discussed with teachers and colleagues their concerns about using the Web with students and explored with them possible topics for my Web site. The final decision for the theme of the site was based on the needs of my program and expectations for Buffalo State students as well as applicability to school curricula.

The young adult novels I chose are regularly taught in middle and high school, thus preservice teachers at Buffalo State are frequently expected to work with these texts during their student teaching experiences. My own experience teaching the novels and observing Buffalo State students teach them suggested that a Web resource to help students understand the history and society of the time period would be beneficial. Increasing students' understanding of the settings might also lead to greater awareness of some of the cultural themes.

I also had a unique resource available that I had used successfully in courses during previous semesters: personal memoirs written by a family member about growing up during the Great Depression. Students found the memoirs helpful and enjoyable for creating a vision of how "real people" lived during this important historical period, juxtaposed to the portrayal of life in the novels. Therefore, placing selected memoirs online to make this resource available

to all teachers became the kernel of the Web site project. The memoirs became a starting point for connecting the literary guide with the study of the two novels.

Assembling Materials for the Web Guide

My next task was to locate suitable supporting Web materials. My own observations of students' use of the Web in schools suggests that teachers often fail to guide students in a critical evaluation of Web-based material relevant to the lesson or task, but instead allow students to surf the Internet hoping to find pertinent information. Because I aimed to model good practice for incorporating the Web into instruction, all sites included in the Web guide were screened for use with young adult learners. Even more, the links are highly specific to the tasks required in the activities. Hot links direct students to specific material relevant to the assignment—in other words, no surfing.

The early stages of the project also involved selecting memoirs that addressed topics appropriate for the secondary ELA classroom and relevant for giving a context for the study of *Roll of Thunder* and *Mockingbird.* I chose the selected memoirs based on their applicability for a range of classroom use that would give a personal depiction of different aspects of life during the Depression.

An Overview of Site Features

I wanted to make the site "teacher friendly," rather than create activities that required technology mastery to implement, so I developed a range of

resources allowing for different levels of technology proficiencies within classrooms. The site provides teachers with a variety of ways to infuse the Web into the study of literature, thereby enriching the content.

The student activities use the power of the Web to augment the study of literature by adapting exercises familiar to ELA teachers. For example, the student activities begin with the development of a Know-Wonder (or Want to learn)-Learned (K-W-L) chart about the Depression. I used Web utility programs from the Quia Teacher Utility site to transform traditional quizzes and vocabulary practice into interactive online learning exercises. (The utilities available at Quia include multiple choice quizzes, vocabulary games, and matching and resequencing exercises.) Further activities engage students in higher-order thinking skills by interconnecting a variety of literacy skills, including information literacy. One activity links an understanding of plot sequencing with Web-based research into the historical period in which the novel is set.

To supplement the memoirs, I developed a series of Activity Guides for students to complete to document their work. These are essentially what reading specialists call Levels Guides in that they move from lower-order comprehension questions (Figure 1) to higher-order critical thinking and literary response tasks (Figure 2). The guides can be printed out so that students do not have to be physically tied to a computer while completing them and will have hard copies to work with to present to their teachers. The memoir Activity Guides include hyperlinks to Web resources as part of the exercise, integrating technology use within the type of exercises familiar to ELA teachers.

The overall design provides ELA teachers with content-based material using the Web as an add-on feature

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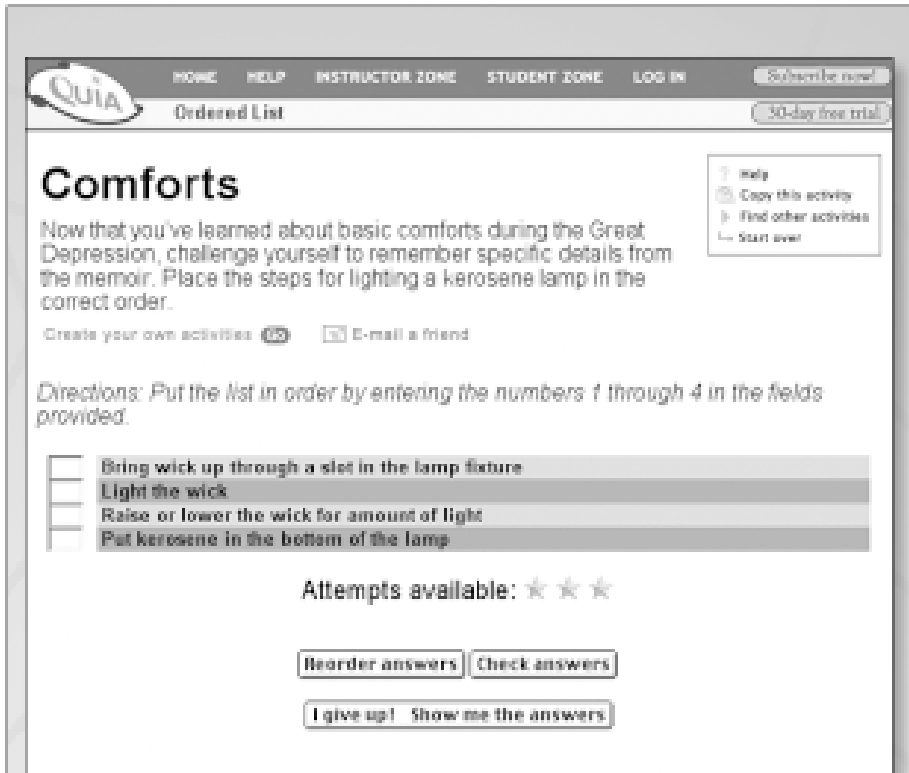
Comforts

Now that you've learned about basic comforts during the Great Depression, challenge yourself to remember specific details from the memoir. Place the steps for lighting a kerosene lamp in the correct order.

Create your own activities   E-mail a friend

Directions: Put the list in order by entering the numbers 1 through 4 in the fields provided.

	Bring wick up through a slot in the lamp fixture
	Light the wick
	Raise or lower the wick for amount of light
	Put kerosene in the bottom of the lamp

Attempts available: ☆ ☆ ☆

[Reorder answers] [Check answers]

[I give up! Show me the answers]

Figure 1. We begin by assessing students recall of factual information.

3) Imagine your home without electricity or indoor plumbing; think about your home with only wood stoves for heating and for cooking. How might your life change? What activities might you have to give up or change? What amount of time during your day might you spend on helping your family provide these basic comforts?
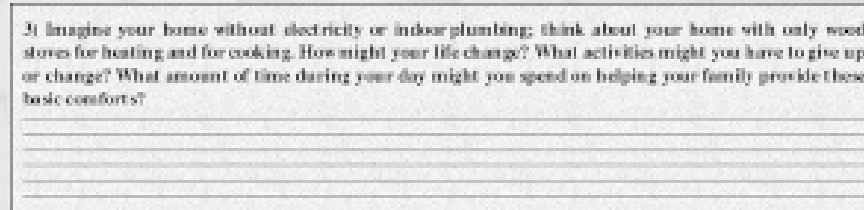
Figure 2. We end by asking students to think critically and compare, analyze, or evaluate the information they read.
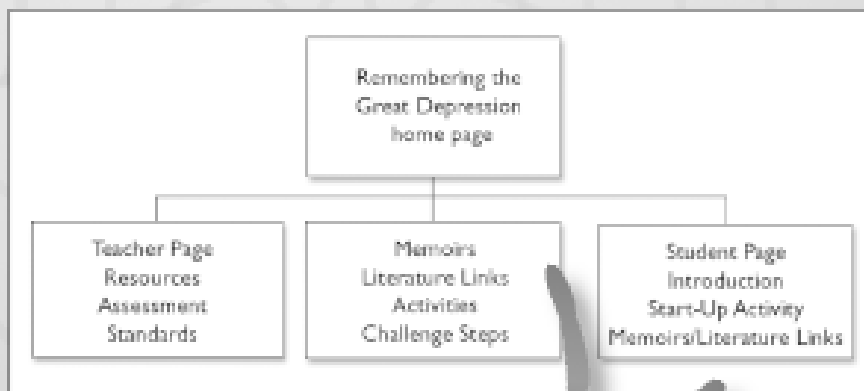

Figure 3. Mapping a Web site.

(requiring a minimal competency with technology) to using the medium for Web-based instruction (requiring a more sophisticated competency with technology). The activities also move from lower- to higher-order skills for students and progress from familiar to more innovative lessons for teachers.

Structure for the Web Guide

The guide is structured to facilitate both teacher and student use. Figure 3 presents a graphic organizer for understanding the design and scope of the site.

In many ways, designing the site was like creating a resource-based textbook. Planning Web activities and organizing Web-based material, however, required thinking in hypertext, anticipating the many ways users might access material. Obviously, users cannot be expected to proceed along a linear structure, so links to and from the various pages had to be planned to allow for maximum flexibility. Additionally, instructions for exercises had to strike a balance between remote user needs and directions involving teacher intervention.

Design for Web Guide Activities

The activities for the novels and memoirs were designed with several purposes in mind to address a variety of needs in the teaching of the ELA with technology infusion. The activities aimed to meet the following requirements:

- The full range of literacy skills outlined by the New York State's Standards for Learning (e.g., language for information and understanding, for analysis, for literary response and expression, for social interaction)
- A wide range of information literacy skills identified by ISTE's National Educational Technology Standards for Students
- Inclusion of alternative forms of literature (such as the nonfiction memoirs)
- Opportunities to demonstrate content mastery

- Opportunities to explore literary concepts (such as setting and theme)
- Appropriate use of Web resources suitable for Grades 7–12
- Variations in teacher and student competencies with technology

For instance, in addition to the memoirs and accompanying activity guides, the site includes 10 activities for each of the two novels. The novels' activities are structured according to the following schema:

Activities 1–5 are utilities I created using Quia. These activities address a range of skills for students and model for teachers a method to translate familiar classroom exercises into simple online learning opportunities. Possible methods for implementing these activities include homework assignments for progress checks and self-testing as well as cooperative learning games and contests for content mastery.

Activities 6–10 are also planned according to levels of complexity but address larger issues involving exploration of literary concepts with expectations for critical thinking and literary interpretation. Each main activity entails a series of exercises, increasing in intellectual challenge. These higher-order activities include time lines, investigation of themes, exploration of setting, and creative expression projects. Because of the scope of these exercises, including increasing levels of challenge for each activity, I will describe only two examples to give readers a sense of implementation possibilities.

Although most of the major activities for the two novels are parallel, they are not identical. Individual exercises have been adapted for the appropriate audience, either middle or high school students.

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As one example, in the exercises on the thematic issue of prejudice, the *Roll of Thunder* culminating exercise asks students to explore Web materials on weight discrimination, targeting younger adolescents' concern about body image. The parallel activity for *To Kill a Mockingbird* is geared toward larger social issues appropriate for older students; users take an interactive tour of the national Civil Rights museum as a foundation for reflecting on racial prejudice.

The Collage activity addresses interpretive visual responses to literature, adapting a popular creative expression project for Web-based teaching. Students are directed to the American Memory site, a prodigious collection of photographs in federal archives from the 1930s and 1940s. As with all the activities, I focused on direct links to appropriate material to use the medium pertinently and efficiently.

Directing students to American Memory, by itself, would certainly be better than directing them to a search engine to try to locate images, but even so, the site is intricately organized, and it could take students days to review the potential material for building their collages. Therefore, I reviewed the collection and identified a single link that gives students a variety of sample images in a contained way; the links provide photo selections from Mississippi and Alabama, the settings for the novels, as materials for building collages. This careful use of relevant links allows class time to be focused on the task rather than devoted to inefficient, and possibly unsuccessful, surfing.

Challenges

The greatest challenge for creating such a site is the fluid nature of the Web itself. While in the process of creating the site, even as activities reached completion, I often had to make changes because of defunct links— sometimes even to the point of having to revise the entire activity to accommodate information from a new Web resource. And, of course, maintaining a site for continuing use means regularly checking through all links and replacing defunct ones.

Another issue to consider when planning to create high-quality Web-based instructional content: it's a time-intensive venture. Without a sabbatical or significant reassignment time, I would not have been able to create as elaborate a product as Remembering the Great Depression. Faculty members certainly have valid concerns about prioritizing technology as part of their work investment. For the prospective Web content creator, I recommend using a scaffolding approach: start small, choose a topic or area of high curriculum need, and create a simple product that can be used again. Remembering the Great Depression provides a range of activities that revise traditional assignments for Web-based teaching, integrating content mastery with technology proficiency.

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Multidisciplinary

Literature continued from p. 35.

Resources

Web Sites

American Memory: http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amhome.html

Quia: www.quia.com

Remembering the Great Depression: http://faculty.buffalostate.edu/beaverjf/nbd

SCORE Project Cyberguides: www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/cyberguide.html

Articles on Web Design and ELA Project Design

Burns, M. (2002). From black and white to color: Technology, professional development and changing practice. *T.H.E. Journal, 29*(11), 36–42.

Christenbury, L. (2000). *Making the journey: Being and becoming a teacher of the language arts.* Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Girod, M., & Cavanaugh, S. (2001). Technology as an agent of change in teacher practice. *T.H.E. Journal, 28*(9), 42–44.

Holden, D. (2002). The litany: Investigating the organizational changes needed to make technology effective in the classroom and create an environment where no child is left behind. *T.H.E. Journal, 30*(2), 68–72.

Long, P. D. (2002). Back to basics and the next big thing. *Syllabus, 16*(1), 10–11.

Miller, S. E. (2001). Technology: What's it good for? *Learning & Leading with Technology, 28*(6), 42–49.

Ruffini, M. F. (2001). Blueprint to develop a great Web site. *T.H.E. Journal, 28*(9), 64.

Nancy Deal is 10-year veteran in the English education program at Buffalo State College. Thirty years ago, her most technological activity was using an electronic typewriter in high school. Her current work includes teaching methods courses; supervising student teachers; and working with program faculty, students, and cooperating teachers to infuse technology meaningfully into their classrooms. She also helped develop the first technology course at Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya, during the 1995–96 academic year.

Do you have an interesting strategy for integrating technology into your classroom?

If so, please share with your colleagues by dropping us a line at letters@iste.org.