



Chapter VIII

Desktop Distance Education: Personal Hosting of Web Courses

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Many instructors are quickly turning to the World Wide Web (WWW) to host the materials and interactions for both distance education and classroom-bound courses. Desktop hosting of WWW-based course materials is becoming a feasible alternative to institutionally provided central servers. Moreover, emerging software is making personal hosting easier and more cost effective than hosting with large courseware shells on central servers. The pros and cons of the institutional versus personal approaches involve pragmatics, academic freedom, intellectual property rights, and interface design. It is argued that desktop hosting provides instructors with a greater sense of control over and ownership of the course and a greater flexibility to design their own course at all levels from the organization of the materials to the layout of the interface. HyperCourseware™ provides a case in point.

The World Wide Web (WWW) provides an opportune media for education. It provides many, if not all, of the potentialities required in the course of education from the simple display of materials for presentation to interactions among the students and instructors and simulations of systems and environments. The advantages of digital media in education are numerous. The list of “x-abilities” provided by Norman (1998) suggests a wide range of compelling reasons for creating an electronic educational environment. Consequently, it is not surprising that for this and many other reasons, there is a rush to host not only some educational materials on the WWW but whole courses from beginning to end. The WWW solves many of the problems of distance education by facilitating dissemination of materials, enhancing communication, and increasing student-teacher interaction. The

WWW is so compelling that instructors in classroom bound settings are also hosting both materials and interactions on the WWW (Hazemi, Hailes and Wilbur, 1998).

In the midst of this mad rush to the WWW a number of fundamental, practical, and policy issues arise. The answers to these questions depend not merely on the instructional setting (distance education versus classroom education) but also on course ownership (individual versus institutional), course lifecycle (from initial development to repeated offering) and course appeal (from popular core courses to highly specialized seminars).

This chapter focuses on several of these issues as they revolve around decisions of where and how to host WWW-based materials. It is argued that these decisions have significant implications on the development of emerging instructional technology and the future landscape of education. As often happens with new technology, initial hardware and software designs tend to dictate application and use rather than vice versa. Such is rapidly becoming the case in software and system architectures for hosting courses on the WWW. Unfortunately, rapid development and premature implementation often has the effect of either a negative backlash (i.e., "Once burned, twice shy") or standardization on the sub-optimal. The latter takes the form of either accepting a less than optimal product or having to work around a poor interface to produce an optimal product. Unfortunately, human nature combined with institutional and economic constraints tends to produce a less than optimal product.

In the present case, we are concerned with emerging technological systems for education. The users of these systems include instructors and students as well as instructional designers and administrators. Thus, the players have many different goals, perspectives, and abilities. In the area of WWW-based education, the issues revolve around not only pedagogy but around the human/computer interface and the implementation of complex systems. The purpose of this chapter is to lay out a number of these issues and then to illustrate and argue for an individualistic approach to WWW hosting of courses rather than an institutional solution.

ISSUES

WWW-based teaching involves a number of issues and requires a number of initial decisions on the part of faculty and administrators. A few of these decisions are listed below as questions:

1. Do we generate our own materials, contract someone to generate the materials, or acquire someone else's materials?
2. Do we host the materials and educational environment on our own system or on some commercial system?
3. Do we develop our own environment, contract someone else to generate the environment, or acquire a commercial system?

Materials

Materials developed for courses range from expensive professional efforts (as much as \$40,000 per course) to inexpensive homegrown efforts on the part of teachers and students. Many college courses, for example start with the syllabus on the WWW, followed by lecture notes and slides. Materials may be generated directly in html (hypertext markup language) or using one of the many commercial WWW authoring tools. Often materials

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