

## "Click on This!": Technology Training for Teaching Professionals

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### Abstract

Haas details his frustrating experience of trying to master the teaching technologies so many instructors within the Virginia Community College System take for granted.

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After a twenty-year hiatus from the academic classroom, I decided that if I wanted to fit into the current academic mold I would have to make a major effort to improve my skills in teaching developmental reading and writing and to improve my knowledge of the new technologies that have literally insinuated themselves into the bricks and mortar of the campus building.

About midway in the first semester, with the generous help of colleagues, I was able to function effectively in the classroom. By the end of the first year, I was able to put together courses that successfully prepared my students for Freshman English. My goal for the second year was to tackle the technology issue. Unfortunately, this was as difficult as bringing down an NFL tailback in the open field. Not only was I missing my tackles, but also my coaches were blocking my attempts to master the game.

Never one to shrink from a challenge, I decided to attend as many professional development classes as my schedule would allow. Fortunately (or unfortunately), all professional development classes on my campus are in applied computer technologies. Needless to say, after twenty years in the business world, a seminar in Nineteenth Century Literature or Teaching Writing to the Functionally Illiterate would have been more appropriate to my needs, but I thought it prudent to follow the path of least resistance, and I flung myself into technology.

My first experience was a class on how to use the Microsoft Outlook Calendar. After two hours of instruction, I discovered that a pencil and the annual bank calendar offered a more efficient method of tracking my appointments than that offered by my computer. I was not important enough to have the number of appointments that justifies the use of a computer managed "Secretary." I was elated at this discovery because it saved me the expense of a Palm Pilot, which was being touted as necessary by the colleagues I had left behind in the business world.

Encouraged by this success, I then attended a seminar (two hours) on the use of MERLOT. However, the MERLOT server was down and, although disappointed, I was able to glean enough through downloaded print outs provided by the instructor to decide that I would like to participate in this national exchange of ideas and research on teaching. A week later, when I attempted to sign on to the project, I found the server out of service again. I persevered. On the third attempt, now three weeks removed from the initial training session, I got access to the site. I received my password and began to upload an article on teaching poetry for peer review. Suddenly, the technological proficiency I thought I had with MERLOT disappeared. I could not figure out how to get the article on the site. I called my technology instructor, who informed me that she had failed to mention in our first MERLOT class that you don't upload to MERLOT. If you want a peer review, you post your article to your Web page and furnish MERLOT with the Web address.

I do not have a Web page. I do not have a Web address.

Back to the classroom for a two-hour tutorial on MS Front Page – this was a productive session. I took functional notes and received a valuable template, which could be a big help in my construction of my Web page.

In the meantime I attended a brown bag session (one and a half hours) on Blackboard, where I saw how nifty it would

be to put my picture and voice on the site in streaming video. Having spent some ten years working with video as a training medium, I immediately recognized that the instructor had mispronounced the name of the technology. It had to be "screaming" video – working with video alone was frustrating enough; combining it with computer technology, no matter how user friendly, would probably precipitate a trip to the "Happy Farm." However, in this session, the instructor did provide a method of using MS Word to critique student writing. This was a windfall. My handwriting is so poor that sometimes I can't read it. I left this session with the feeling that technology did have something to offer. It could improve my legibility if not my teaching.

Now it was time to return to the development of my Web page. I had no problems opening the template, and I began the construction of my page. After about four hours of intense labor, I discovered that I did not know how to manipulate those damn boxes that line up the secondary pages on the Home page so someone can navigate the site. I called for help. The instructor was preparing for a summer workshop and would not be available, but if I attended that workshop I would have an opportunity to work on my Web page under technical supervision. Since I was also preparing for a symposium on a teaching method that was easily adapted to online teaching, I put the development of my Web page on hold, signed up for the summer workshop, and plunged into symposium preparations.

The symposium was two days and, typically, the sponsors took three hours of the two days to introduce a new technology, Lectora. Like Blackboard, Lectora is a virtual space where teachers and students can come together to discuss issues pertinent to their online instruction – provided there are no electrical storms in the area, the server is up, the modems are humming, and there is a convenient time for all to chat. I never did get an explanation of why we were being trained on Lectora when the VCCS is committed to Blackboard. I suppose that the Lectora people were picking up part of the cost of the symposium. Since my time at the symposium was being funded through a grant, I thought it best to go with the flow and not inquire why I was being trained on a technology we were not going to use. I did make one discovery: Lectora is the technology that supplies the steroids for the hypertext.

Back to campus, grant completed, time for the summer workshop, and my opportunity to finally build my Web page. The workshop opened with four hours of instruction on Blackboard. I interrupted the "clicking" to ask a question. What are the benefits of using this technology? The instructor from Blackboard launched into a litany of Blackboard related activities. I interrupted again and asked, "What does Blackboard offer that I can't get from posting my course to my Web page and using email to communicate with my students?" (The question really wasn't disingenuous. Even though I didn't have a Web page, I was going to have one at the end of the workshop.) My question received considerable attention. Both the vendor instructor and a senior technology instructor from the community college system responded. They provided a lengthy answer, which I distilled to "You don't have 'chat' capability on email." In fact, they used so many words that I thought it better not to follow their answer with another question: "Couldn't a Web Board do the same thing?"

In all fairness, my discipline is English. We don't have the occasion to use all those nifty gadgets that are appropriate to disciplines like science, medicine, business, and art history. We attempt to focus our students' attention on the text, and no matter how many steroids I pump into the text – spinning poems and illustrating short stories with clip art – the student still has to come to grips with the words on the page. My technology instructor has shown me course material in these other disciplines that takes advantage of the technologies to good effect. They enhance student learning, but the only thing I've seen in my discipline is hypertext on steroids – the Pretty Page.

After a total of six hours of instruction on Blackboard, I still do not know how to access the site. The instruction sheet I have in my office for accessing the English section of Blackboard requires sixteen separate functions. I am usually denied access somewhere between functions seven and eight. I was not encouraged when the senior technology instructor from the community college system told us not to access the site until after July because the system is undergoing a server conversion. I am confident that six weeks after the workshop training, when I am allowed to access the site, if I know how to, I will need another four hours of instruction in order to execute Blackboard's basic functions.

The afternoon of the workshop opened with a discussion of the requirements of good online instruction. There was some pertinent information in this session, which reinforced the need for a lot of online chat if you are teaching (or is it supervising?) an online course. In this session, I asked what there is in online teaching that motivates the teacher. How does the teacher motivate the student? Those questions were not answered. It seems we have to operate under the assumption that all students in online courses are sufficiently motivated to complete the work in a timely and competent manner. I assumed that teachers have to be self-motivated as well to acquire all the knowledge, skills, and digital dexterity that it takes to produce an effective online course. When I asked about the rewards system that is in place to assist in teacher self-motivation, I did not get an answer. The acquisition and application of technology to teaching will not be rewarded in this community college system – unless you consider professional development instruction a reward. Since the next session that afternoon was the opportunity for me to develop my Web page, I

considered professional development instruction a reward.

We switched classrooms for the afternoon session. We also switched from desktop to laptop computers. And these were the laptops without the roller balls that allow for manipulation of the mouse. I figured out that the black screen at the bottom of the keyboard had something to do with moving the mouse, but it wasn't until I saw another person operate her mouse that I knew I was in the right church but definitely in the wrong pew. Arthritis has ravaged what little digital dexterity I possessed. How was I going to manipulate this mystery pad? As I ran my finger across the black pad, the mouse pointer unleashed a frenzy of activity shooting around the screen as if pursued by a virtual cat. Eventually, I gained a modicum of control – at least enough to load the floppy disk containing my Front Page template. No go. My computer contained only a CD port. What to do with the five disks I have so conscientiously prepared for the building of my Web page? Luck had it that there was one disk port available, and with considerable help from two people who took pity on my ineptitude, they installed it in my laptop. I quickly found the spot in the template program that previously had shut me down. However, the technical supervision that I was promised was engaged elsewhere. After about twenty minutes of my fiddling with the program, the technical supervision took away my floppy port to be used by a more deserving student, probably the one who ate my lunch.

The next day of the workshop offered clicking instructions on Whiteboard and Photo Suite, which only compounded the confusion and frustration I had already experienced

As any casual reader may observe, when it comes to technology I need a lot of help. However, the help I need does not involve or include hour upon hour of instruction in "Now, click on this!"

Instead, I need answers to the following:

How will the technology improve my academic efficiency or my teaching ability?

How does it enhance student learning?

Who has applied it successfully in academic, business and/or military courses?

How long does it take to develop a facility with the technology?

Do the benefits of acquiring the skills it takes to manipulate the program trump the time it takes to acquire the skills?

What is the best online tutorial for this technology? Is it designed for the uninitiated?

How do I post to the site? How do I edit what's on the site?

Will someone please develop my Web page for me?

I am not naive enough to think that this tome will result in technology training that meets the needs of the people being trained.

Some years ago Microsoft set the standard for how to train people on its technology. It sent thousands of certified people into the field to perpetuate this "hunt and click" method of training. It is ingrained in the fabric of American education. It is what professional technology trainers do. No matter that technology may add minimal benefits to the learning process. No matter that the hours it takes to acquire a facility with the program do not equal the benefits accrued from its use. No matter that most vendor training is a marketing effort, not a genuine training enterprise. We persevere, pretending that "hunt and click" is the best method of training teaching professionals.

Technology is the wave of the future depositing tons of "Sam" dollars on the shores of academia. We will "hunt and click" our way to prosperity. I am not disposed to fight the wave, but I have spent too many hours "hunting and clicking" to no avail. When offered the next "Clickshop," I must respond, "Click on *this!*"

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