Abstract

This report describes the creation of a shared writing environment to support the teaching of rhetoric. The elements of the environment include a set of writing spaces for students and a set of tools for instructors. The environment is Web-based, and is supported by the development of a database containing text and graphics. The scripting language used is PHP (PHP Personal Hypertext Processor language) and the database used is mySQL. Both are available without charge. This environment embodies and extends the principles of the Enthymematic Journal, developed by Dr. John Scenters-Zapico at the University of Texas at El Paso (Scenters-Zapico and Shontz, forthcoming), and was used in three different courses there in the Spring 2001 term. This report includes a preliminary assessment of The Journal Place in action, and a discussion of future plans and enhancements.
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1. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Much of the benefit of the Internet is gained from its power to facilitate communication, and thus collaboration. The Internet was originally developed to share the computing power of major supercomputers, but arguably the most benefit came from the use of email to collaborate on research (Schatz 1992, 87). Interactive chat, where users can see each other's comments in real time, has been a staple of the World Wide Web (Web) nearly since its inception. Sophisticated software packages such as Lotus Notes (Lotus Development Corporation, 2000) and Microsoft NetMeeting (Microsoft, 2000) include several forms of collaborative writing environments.

Educators have been investigating the power of networked computers to assemble shared writing environments since the earliest days of the Internet. In the late 80's and early 90's, many educational researchers began to investigate systems providing links (or "hyperlinks") between texts as the basis of a method to provide support for writing (Scardamalia and Bereiter 1991, 37; Neuwirth et al 1990, 183). Some of these efforts were continued as Web-based designs (see CSILE below).

There are four basic elements in most writing environments that are combined in various ways.

1. Interactive chat: An environment where several students may be "present" at any one time, composing comments and submitting them. These are variously referred to as chat rooms, whiteboards, or chat zones.
2. Discussion list: Messages are submitted in "threads", or topics. One can reply to other messages or start a new topic. Some formats allow display of several messages simultaneously, others do not.

3. Annotation tool: A facility for others to comment on and/or revise a text.


These are usually combined with various layout styles, banners, or animations to try to provide a stimulating environment for writing.

Several Web environments have been developed specifically for the teaching of writing. The Critical Tools suite (Computer Writing and Research Lab 2000) provides a set of implements for writing instruction, including a discussion forum, a bibliography builder, and an annotation tool. The Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment (The Daedalus Group 1997) provides instructors the opportunity to provide various "prompts" to students to stimulate their writing. PaperReview (Studio for Instructional Technology and English Studies 2000) contains a set of tools to allow users to comment on a paper, paragraph by paragraph. CSILE (Computer Supported Intentional Learning Environments) has produced a system called Knowledge Base that attempts to create a "learning community" analogous to a set of researchers citing each others' works in published journals and commenting on those works (Centre for Applied Cognitive Science, 2000). This would fit loosely into the "annotation tool" category above.

Why do we need another type of writing environment, then? Because there are many ways of teaching writing and each is structured and presented in a different way. Writing
instructors present their materials in accordance with different theories, and need to have flexibility in choosing a writing framework, either through customization features or a custom environment. Many writing instruction methods have not yet been represented in a Web-based format. The project I have undertaken represents a particular writing instruction method, the Enthymematic Journal, developed by Dr. John Sccenters-Zapico (Sccenters-Zapico and Shontz, forthcoming). The basic structure will combine a set of individual journals with a shared comment area to support the teaching of rhetoric. The entire package is titled The Journal Place.

1.1. Conceptual Foundations of the Enthymematic Journal

The concept for this project began with a request from Dr. Sccenters-Zapico to create a particular type of Web-based writing environment. This environment would consist of three spaces, titled as follows:

1. Stasis: The use of this term is from Roman law, meaning approximately "the points on which the parties agree to disagree". Its use in the Enthymematic Journal is for the student to summarize what he/she knows about the assigned topic, including current facts and opinions.

2. Aha!: This section holds the enthymemes, the terms that "spark" new ideas about the assigned topic and the ideas that develop from those terms.

3. Dialogic: This term originates in the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin. In brief, conversations are messy affairs, always in some kind of unvoiced context. This space is used by "clustermates" to comment on the student's Stasis and Aha! journals.
In brief, what Dr. Scenters-Zapico requested was a Web page consisting of a set of three spaces (they can be thought of as files). Two of the spaces would be used by an individual student. The third would be used by the other students in a "cluster" and would be displayed to, but not edited by, the "target student". No current writing environment provided the opportunity to customize the display in this form.

Scenters-Zapico began using this form of journal several years ago in a simple notebook form. The notebooks were kept in a central location, and students would come to that location to make their entries. He later designed a version of the Enthymematic Journal environment using the HyperStudio package for the Macintosh. The resulting journals contained styling and special effects that would impress even today's Web designers, but they had two drawbacks—they could only be displayed on computers with HyperStudio installed and the sharing rules could not be enforced automatically. In the late 1990's the author and others at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi developed early Web-based prototypes using simple Perl scripts and flat files for storage. With the current version, we are using a relational database to fully automate the permission and display customization features of The Journal Place.