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Catering to the Ancient Masses: Course Management and the Internet

A well designed course website can facilitate the difficulties of managing large ancient history classes at state universities. Experience shows that textbooks and readers are inadequate to class needs, whether by failing to address the same material as the lectures or by doing so with uneven emphasis and detail. Any attempt to test students on archaeological images shown in class requires student accessibility to the images outside of class. In order to comply with ADA guidelines, universities require that students with learning disabilities receive access to lecture notes. In a non-web environment, course announcements and/or emendations must be exhaustively reiterated. Invariably, instructions and announcements fail to reach some portion of the enrollment. The inevitable result is student queues during "office hours."

Ideally, an entire course can be electronically "canned" and placed at a website, eliminating the need for students to purchase expensive and (for non-majors) irrelevant textbooks. Moreover, a shift to web-based course instruction holds the potential to challenge textbook publishers to adapt to the growing demand for digital texts and to re-evaluate their at times reactionary attitude toward electronic publishing. As the speed of access to the Internet accelerates, websites are increasingly able to facilitate the presentation of course materials with more robust technologies, including Geographic Information System maps, animated graphic images, and both live and pre-recorded video feeds. Finally, people throughout the world can query the content of these websites through the use of search engines and consult the online materials. This can be particularly useful for K-12 students (from whom my own websites receive several queries every week). Course websites pose the very real potential, therefore, to interact not only with enrolled students but with elements throughout mainstream society and furnishes, therefore, an incalculable tool for encouraging popular interest in the classics.

Course websites can furnish one effective means to address these problems. Simple architecture directs students quickly and directly to the required materials. Scaled pages reduce downloading time, while directional hotlinks on every page facilitate navigation. A constantly updated bulletin board assures the dissemination of announced changes to the schedule and/or assigned materials. Posted lecture outlines, maps, and images comply with ADA requirements; reduce complaints; and, when marked in hyper text and effectively linked, draw student attention to relevant images, time lines, diagrams, and maps. Students immediately recognize the website as the key organ of the class, outside class itself. Placement of all necessary documents online reduces the need to photocopy course materials, thus, reducing costs for departments and students alike. Links to related websites and access to the instructors' email addresses encourage student communication and exploration, without unduly imposing on faculty research time. Finally, utilization of available electronic information technologies sustain student attention by delivering the material in a manner that is both stimulating and impossible to reproduce in print format.