Privileged Information, Passwords, and Politics: What I Learned About Teaching Web-Page Development on a Shoestring Budget

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This narrative discusses the experience gained by a professor of social work who, with a small grant, makes use of web page development in an addictive disorders course. The professor tells of the lack of knowledge and the protection of technology information in the university setting. Students reflect on their learning experience. The author also suggests that this particular project demonstrates the ways in which knowledge of technology is denied to some, and, therefore, creates a system of privileged information.

. After looking at a request for proposals for a $2,000 faculty development grant that centered on innovative approaches to reduce "risks associated with college-age drinking through community, faculty, and student activities and initiatives," I thought that I could be interested. However, the inordinate amount of time required to submit a proposal for such a small grant reminded me of Oliver Twist asking Mr. Bumble for more soup: "Please, sir, I want some more." Usually, the hunger is greater than the portion given. Besides, I had secured several large grants from other organizations that provided comfortable funding for human and material resources, so why spend effort on this one? Nevertheless, a group of women faculty in the School of Social Work called a meeting to discuss submitting a proposal for the $2,000. During the discussion, I was seduced by the enthusiasm of the members and by the interesting possibilities of the project. I soon agreed with the ideas of the group: to submit a proposal that combines technology with increasing awareness of the consequences of irresponsible drinking in the university environment.

We began collecting suggestions for what was to be called the "Drink, Drank, Drunk" project and further discussed the need for students in the Graduate School of Social Work to develop a web page. They would learn the techniques of becoming webmasters!

Their project for the semester would be to design a web page that would increase campus awareness of the abuse of alcohol in the University community. As we continued to generate ideas for the project, we thought of including an ethnographic journal. The students would visit bars near the campus to observe drinking behavior and describe the images they observed, as well as their feelings, in a reflective journal. They would photograph posters, flyers, and any forms of advertising found on or near the campus that would attest to irresponsible drinking in the University environment. We would administer a questionnaire to the students taking the course in substance abuse before the project to evaluate their knowledge of the risk of college-aged drinking and after the project to determine their growth, i.e., to quantify the level of their awareness about alcohol consumption and its abuse on the college campus. Finally, we developed a budget.
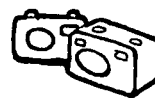
Two digital cameras were to be purchased and software compatible with the University's existing software had to be obtained. Refreshments were budgeted to help the students cope with the Louisiana heat as well as with the stress associated with

capturing "drink, drank, drunk" information through digital photography. A student knowledgeable in web page development would be hired for the semester to act as consultant to the graduate students and to help with the technical aspects. Everything seemed to move quickly in place as we spoke more about our ideas. We even felt that we could team-teach classes and present our findings at professional conferences. So we budgeted in conference fees for two students. We got the blessings of the Dean, submitted our grant proposal for $2,000 "to impact student attitudes and behaviors about high risk drinking, and its associated negative consequences," and waited.

The Wait

We knew we had submitted an innovative proposal and that incorporating technology in an Addictive Disorders course in the School of Social Work would be a "first" for our School. How could someone not see the innovation in curriculum development and the student empowerment inherent in the proposal? We waited past the time of the award announcement and, because we had not heard anything, I could wait no longer. I contacted the head of the funding group and was told that we had been selected for the award. Everyone was thrilled! Our photos were taken for the campus newspaper, and all of us were energized by the news of the award.

A week later, the semester would start. The excitement waned. I began revising the previous year's syllabus to fit the content of the grant. Since I am the faculty member who teaches the addictive behaviors course to MSW students, I began to integrate key aspects of the grant into the course syllabus. I was eager to bring the excitement of the new project to the students, but there was a certain diffidence on my part. All the gremlins of doubt and foreboding crept into my mind. I began to question the timing of the project.

I believed that the syllabus, with the new project, would create a surprise for students, who would have no idea what to expect with the inclusion of this type of project into the course. I reflected on this issue and discussed my apprehension with the other members of the team. They validated my concerns and helped me to work through my anxiety and to focus on the benefits of the project to social work students. The discussion with my colleagues helped me to reframe student participation in a meaningful way, reminding me also that the ultimate responsibility for choice, of course, is with the students. I knew that they would make an informed decision even after class started. Besides, social work students need knowledge about web page development and evaluation given the way technology is used to inform social workers and their constituents in the areas of child-support enforcement, adoption registries, and other social service related resources. To understand how a web page is developed would help students to understand knowledge development and dissemination while enabling them to be judicious about content found on web pages.

The Reality: Class begins

On the first day of class, I provided an overview of the new addictive disorders course to the fourteen students registered. They would have an opportunity to develop an innovative project that would benefit other students while learning new skills in developing an alcohol-prevention project. The students would design a web page that would help them to "acquire an understanding...of the concepts related to substance abuse with a specific focus on prevention strategies for alcohol abuse" (course syllabus). In designing the web page, they were to consider the following questions:

• How do the media shape drinking behavior?

•How is this technology useful in reaching college-age students?

• What campus and community-based resources are available for the treatment or prevention of alcohol abuse?

• How can technology be used as part of an overall strategy to reduce high-risk drinking?

• How do cultural norms, policies, and practices affect the use/abuse of alcohol?

The class became enthusiastic and remained interested throughout the course, although a few of the students were anxious about developing a web page. Some students voiced their concerns about their lack of experience in the area of technology. I listened and reassured them that they would have all the assistance they needed and that I had unbridled confidence in their ability to create an interesting and skillfully prepared web page. In fact, I believed that the anxiety felt by the students would propel them to develop web pages successfully, especially since the project was worth fifty percent of the course grade. After the first class, I was confident that all would go well. I also recognized that developing a web page would help students discover a new and exciting way to create a prevention project that could reach a large population of the University community.

The first three classes focused on an overview of addictive disorders from a social work perspective, various theories about addiction, including the disease concept, and team building/task group development strategies. The fourth class session was to include an overview of web page development and camera work. So off to the lab! However, fate had a different agenda. There was no lab, and "plan B" had to be put into effect. Students were assigned to read

material about drinking on college campuses and to learn about the current modes of prevention as they relate to hazardous drinking on college campuses. The works of Walters, Bennett, and Noto (2000), Cummings (1997), and Vik, Culbertson, and Sellers (2000) were made required reading. This unexpected change in the syllabus eventually made sense because the information provided by the readings, as well as the discussion, helped students to think about research-based strategies for effective alcohol-prevention programs for college-aged students and thus design exemplary web pages.

Facts versus Privileged Information

While students learned about addictive behavior through various instructional methods in the classroom, I worked steadily to develop the materials and resources that we spelled out in the proposal, which, I discovered, were not the same material and resources needed for the course. Let's say that we were overly ambitious about what we could do with $2,000, and that we were clueless even though we researched what we needed for the project. We had a case of "false facts" here! The computer lab, software, passwords, and political process were critical pieces of the project that we didn't immediately understand and demanded a great deal of time and energy. Although I had some help from the faculty member who taught a summer web-page development workshop at the University, I remained stranded when it came to finding a laboratory with the kind of software required by our school. I called numerous people on campus to find a laboratory. I had earlier felt a sense of challenge because we have a large campus; I knew that the computer lab with the software we needed would eventually surface. What I did not know was that finding a lab would involve traveling down many roads, with dead ends and detours, all during a time of construction because I was not a member of

this particular coterie. In retrospect, I should have figured out some of these limitations since every member of the team, and almost all faculty members in the School, had the "under construction" sign posted on their web sites.

At the time I was navigating the lab space problem at the University, I learned that I needed a license agreement along with the software program we were to purchase. I was familiar with a license agreement but had assumed that our campus had a license agreement for this kind of coursework. I called a few places on campus to purchase software for the class. The cost of the license would substantially reduce the amount of the small grant. It was at that moment that I recognized the lack of awareness of our team and how hope, enthusiasm, and goodwill can turn into a frustrating dilemma. I tried to solve the problem by seeking more funds—in essence, "Please, sir, I want more." Unlike Mr. Bumble in *Oliver Twist,* the people who funded the project were kind when they denied the request.

I contacted other people in an attempt to solve the budgetary problem. Nothing seemed to work. The distress seemed to be expanding. Classes were in session. My level of frustration paralleled feelings of inadequacy, and I was cast in a drama where I played a central character in the "run around." Many social workers, clients, and students have starred in that feature. It is unpleasant. Finally, when I was at my wit's end, I spoke to someone at the University who could tell me all about software purchasing, license agreements, and computer labs on campus. After playing telephone tag for days with him, he called me at home, apologetic about being

unavailable yet willing to help me solve the problems. He inquired about the project and then suggested that maybe the School of Social Work had a license agreement. After searching, he found that although the School of Social Work did not have an agreement, the research unit in the school had the agreement. Eureka! I now had the information I sought and an ally in that exclusive circle of technology. We could buy the software without decimating our budget. Then, this miracle worker suggested that I try for the lab that was in our building. "Lab? What lab?" I asked. "The other department in your building has a computer lab on first floor," he said. I had never seen a computer lab in our building. I then spoke to people in the school who verified that there is a lab that we share with the other unit in the building. This information was a closely guarded secret, since most of the faculty to whom I spoke at the School knew nothing about the lab. I promptly marched downstairs to find a well-hidden, locked computer lab that had enough computers for all of our students. Success again, right under my nose! After meeting with the faculty and staff in the other unit, I obtained a key to the lab and a reservation to use the room. My plan to get the students on task with this assignment was coming closer to fruition.

Politics 101

I told the Dean of Admissions at the School of Social Work that we were interested in hiring a social work student to teach web page development to our students. No student came forward from within the School, so I advertised outside of the School. I subsequently interviewed three students who had experience developing web pages. The final selection for the student teacher was a young woman who had her own web page business and had taught a course to junior high school students in a learning-disabled classroom environment. I thought that if she

could teach students with learning disabilities, the course should be a walk in the park for our eager Master's level social work students. It seemed, at first, that our Webmaster in charge of the School's web page opposed our selection, perhaps because the student teacher was not a member of the technologically privileged cadre of the School. When he learned that she had not only been screened and selected by me and by the other team members, but also been referred to us by someone whom he considered a "respectable person" on campus, he was quick to give his stamp of approval. His sudden reversal of opinion alerted me to the political nature of the technologically privileged group on campus. It soon became clear that finding the key to the web page development project was like finding, as Winston Churchill put it, "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." I had the big picture of the project. The larger campus was the architect of the pieces of this picture, and the developers of the bits were technocratic secret agents who had the key and would not freely share any information to the outsider.

Password Police and Secret Intelligence

I was now ready to teach students how to use the software program, but fate again became unkind. I didn't know that I needed a password to download the software, and the privileged guardian of the sacred word refused to give me the password for downloading the software. His student worker (who also had the password) was given instructions to download the software so that we could use it for class. Since the student had other pressing obligations such as class and examinations, she was not able to download the software when I needed it. I tried everything to obtain the password. The gatekeeper would not budge. This was classified information, only available to those individuals deemed trustworthy and tightlipped. I thought that I was in one of those

old movies where secrets, codes, and passwords were reserved for intelligence agents who were barred from speaking to anyone.

The trouble with obtaining the password occurred on the day that I planned to facilitate the orientation to the software program. I expected the computers to be ready with installed software. The director apologized for the no show by the student and said that he would install the software since he could not give me the password. He explained that a student might download inappropriate material on the campus computer. I wasn't listening. He protected that assumption with his power to conceal and, thus, control the information. Nevertheless, he and his assistant downloaded the software on nine of the sixteen computers that were in the lab to serve the fourteen students I had in the class!

The first class on web-page development for this course on addictive disorders took place two weeks behind schedule. It consisted of the student teacher reviewing basic web language. The students seemed interested, frustrated, and lost. They had to double up on computers, and they did not have written information about the topic that was being presented on that day. After that class period, we were able to get the software program downloaded on all of the working computers. Two sessions later, students met in the lab again, this time to learn the software. The student worker gave them a web site to review that explained the particular software program. They were now given digital cameras and instructed on their use by one of the faculty team members. Students selected their teams. There were three teams that all had access to digital cameras.

In the classroom, the students continued to learn about addictive behavior through lecture, videotapes, and discussion. They attended a twelve-step program of their choice in order to understand the nature of twelve step programs, wrote papers about

their experience attending the twelve-step program, were encouraged at each class period to think about the value of newly discovered information for the development of their page, and asked to integrate course content into the prevention project. With three class sessions left to work on their pages, students were advised that although the lab remained locked during the day, they had access by simply requesting the key.

Once the students completed the web page, the student-teacher/technician attempted to place the page on the School web site but another frustrating password problem arose. She lacked "high-level" clearance in our department and thus was not allowed to have the School's password. Consequently, one web page developed by students was linked to my faculty web site.

Students were given two written checklists to evaluate their web page and the group work process. The first checklist helped students to examine the content of text and images and the placement of both text and image on a web page. A second checklist was a web-page evaluation that included self-evaluation as well as an evaluation of the team. These checklists were submitted by each student at the end of the semester along with their journals.

The Student Experience

A few students described a sense of panic at the beginning of the assignment. They recorded their thoughts and feelings in their journals. They wrote about the challenge of the assignment and their concerns about group work. At the same time, other students described feeling confident and gratified, especially when they took photos. One group of students divided tasks and assigned one

person to photography, another to research. Another group had each member develop a page with photographs and text.

Despite the fact that the students had a great deal of trepidation, the groups rose to the challenge. All three groups designed web pages. Only one of the groups had difficulty publishing the segments to make an entire web page. One group published a web page that was easily accessible on the Internet. A second group published a page and saved it on computer diskettes. In addition, several students in the class developed personal web pages as part of an additional assignment for extra credit. The self-evaluation from the checklist showed that students learned a number of things about themselves and their group. Some comments on their accomplishments:

"I learned the importance of group work and I learned the need for increased awareness of addictions on a college campus."

"I learned to use web page designs, software, and eventually grew to see [that] this can be an asset and something that I would like to build on to market myself in social work."

"I learned to e-mail pages and pictures. I learned how to upload a web page."

"I also learned how to make my own web page."

Students also made comments about the benefits of the project to their educational experience in the School of Social Work. Some students commented on their evolving creativity.

"...Drawing on my visual creativity for the first time in this program..."

"I liked the freedom to be creative."

"This was the first time I had ever used a digital camera and the first time I had combined photos with writing. I enjoyed that process and found that images added depth and creativity to what I had been thinking about contributing to the site."

Several students enjoyed researching content on the web page. Other students seemed to enjoy reviewing other types of software, and one student purchased a copy of the software in order to increase his understanding of and sense of accomplishment with the software program.

In addition to student learning outcomes, students were asked for suggestions to improve the project. The overwhelming majority of students wanted more flexibility with the choice and use of software and more accessibility to the lab with functional computers. Students made the following comments:

"Easier use of the computer lab."

"I would like written instructions on how to use the software and more time in the computer lab."

"As an alternative to group projects (that again proved difficult because of lack of access to technology and geographic distance of members), individuals could develop personal web pages using any software available."

"I wish there would be a better lab available for us to use. The technical problems often caused a hindrance."

Nevertheless, despite the obstacles inherent in the course, students seemed excited about their accomplishments with the project. I was impressed with their commitment, their determination, and their achievement.

Student comments about the lab, the course, and the software were quite valid. In addition, beyond technical materials, the network to technical knowledge often seemed privileged to webmasters, technicians, and other specialists who tended to operate in a hierarchical fashion. "I have the technological information, the passwords, and the codes. You don't. Access denied!" This hierarchy collided with the process of knowledge dissemination, relegating it to a system of "haves and have nots." This system seems to be reminiscent of the continued dilemma in this country as to who has access to resources such as housing, education, health care, and other slices of the American pie.

Another dilemma that seems to mirror the social welfare state in this country is the gatekeeping practice of password distribution to those individuals deemed worthy. This unequal distribution prevents some groups from entering into a location of increased capability and increased knowledge acquisition.

The "Drink, Drank, Drunk" project had a sobering effect on me, especially when I consider the role of privilege, politics, and passwords in knowledge development and transmission. It convinced me of the importance of connecting with those individuals in organizations who allow you not only entrance but also access to pertinent knowledge. It reminded me of the perplexing necessity of involuntary lifelong learning that challenges not only intellectual capacity but also emotional and spiritual agency lest we become sullen and embittered as a result of feeling left out of a particular knowledge loop, thus becoming hopelessly disempowered. Furthermore, the experience taught me to evaluate local resources differently. Although resources may exist, access may not be allowed. Thus, a different set of questions has to be asked before one can embark on a

relatively new, highly technological project because the paradigms are different. In the future, I would opt for more specifics in order to be able to problem solve more expeditiously. At the same time, I have experienced the pain and frustration associated with the feeling of being left out and being marginalized in a large bureaucratic organization. It may not be an uncommon occurrence in such organizations, but the experience with this course represents a caveat to those of us who are ambitious in creating a new and creative learning environment that will help students when we are not clear about the formal and informal, spoken and unspoken, written and unwritten rules governing privileged information.

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