

California Virtual Campus Final Report: April 21, 2007

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Project: English 365: **English 365: English Writing Skills / Santa Rosa Junior College Online Writing Lab**

Below is a course description for the course I developed during this project:

English 365: English Writing Skills is specifically designed for students who want to do focused work on particular writing skills—skills that they may have lost over time, or never acquired in other classes, but need for success in other courses or in their occupations. Students select modules themselves if they know what skills they want to work on, follow the recommendations of an instructor in another course, or take the diagnostic exam (after enrolling in the course). Students must acquire a total of 25 points to pass the course. Each module will give students between 2 and 8 points.

My goal was to create a course that would meet SRJC students' needs for focused work on those skills they are weak in. I also wanted to make this curriculum available to all SRJC students in a new Online Writing Lab. As I put the finishing touches on the modules, I find that I am proud of my efforts. I faced great challenges and devoted long hours to developing curriculum and learning how to use new applications and components.

My purpose in this project was to create a distinct and inviting online learning environment. Certainly, creating multimedia activities for students was a big part of my work, as was writing the best curriculum I could, but as a part of this overall concern, rather than my principal goal. My challenge was in figuring out how to create that place and deciding what kind of place it should be.

In traditional education, being in a physical space with a teacher and other students is an important part of a student's learning experience. Moreover, the "health" of that environment impacts learning: the classroom, the building and its lighting and heating systems, the campus and the weather outside, and, of course, the teacher and students themselves, all affect how students will connect to themselves and to one another.

Online, then, how to create a sense of place, with all of these benefits? Critics of online learning persist in arguing that online learning will never be as good as a

course in a real classroom precisely because it is missing this principal ingredient: the classroom environment. Unfortunately, critics can find ample evidence of online courses that are essentially digitized handouts describing assignments and text submission dates. And even when such courses offer amazing content, in the online environment, traditionally formatted handouts and lecture notes do not communicate that content effectively.

Answer 1) Personalize—just as we personalize our classrooms, with tone of voice, an attitude toward the curriculum and students, and a sense of being located in a particular time and place . . . Online there are tools to create a personal inviting space, and not just a space that is a pale imitation of the “real thing,” but a space that takes advantage of all that the web affords. Our students are already used to thinking of the web as a place for self-expression—consider their common haunts: MySpace, YouTube, iTunes, blogs. The web, for our students, is a place to discover innovative and exciting human-made environments.

Answer 2) Engage the Mind—Find the means to involve students in the site through activities and through design elements. Encourage active rather than passive (read “bored and obligatory”) presence.

With these goals, I began the project by searching for websites that presented engaging environments, hoping to find models for my own work. I assumed all of these sites would be interactive, and that they would contain multimedia. First, I focused on other online writing labs at universities and colleges around the country. Most were merely functional, (excepting a few greats like Grammar Bytes, the Guide to Grammar and Writing developed by Charles Darling, and the Flash-animated Writing Tutorials at the E-Resource Center, CUNY). The sites that were most interesting to me were professional. No surprise there, *they* have money. Many of these professional sites are wonderful, and, unfortunately, use pc-based tools to develop their beautiful training videos (I am a Mac person). More searching for a Mac-based equivalent (no luck) encouraged me to stick with Flash, as difficult as it is, when it came time to create video for the site.

The more I explored, the more I was seduced by cutting (or bleeding) edge Flash animations. Take a look at [eminem's web site \(eminem.com\)](http://eminem.com) or mailorderchickens.org and you will see what I'm talking about. But of course, I had nowhere near the talent to create anything like what I was seeing. At one point, I remember thinking that I would just forget the whole thing since the pros could do anything I could a million times better, making my little attempt at a site appear ridiculous. And then, through fwa.com, a site that archives award winning Flash pages, I discovered resources for great customizable Flash page templates complete with links that trigger actions such as page turning, or movement of objects on or off stage. Templates! Felt a bit like cheating.

I quickly changed my mind, however, after I found the perfect template and started working with it to build the site's intro page. Changing anything, if you don't have a strong foundation in Flash, can lead to catastrophe (one time, I had to dump two weeks' worth of work because I had changed something that seemed meaningless but wasn't). Still, I think the templates in Flash are wonderful: with one Flash course behind me, and a willingness to learn while doing and to endure occasional periods of extreme stress, these templates enabled me to work with components that would otherwise have been out of reach.

And one thing led to another. I discovered all kinds of great extensions that meant I didn't have to hand create every component on the site. I could build on and mess around with what others had done. An article I read on wired.com points out that components are the wave of the future. Makes total sense to me. I love the tab panel components from Project Seven, and though it has a few quirks, the pageFlipper program from Flashloaded.

All of these components add fun to the site, but they also engage readers and direct their attention in a meaningful way. For example, using Accordion Magic Tab Panels, I don't flood readers with links to outside resources all at once. Instead, each resource has a tab heading. If a reader likes a particular resource, the reader clicks the tab, and at that point is presented with more information about that site. And using Tab Panel Magic, I present readers with one section at a time of a large lesson, collapsing all other text until that text is needed. Presenting information in tabs on a single page creates coherence between ideas and allows students to quickly tab through the sections, noticing key concepts and easily recognizing the difference between general and specific information.

Another significant part of personalizing the site, and making it a human environment, was to bring in video lessons. I arranged to reserve the SRJC recording studio on two Friday afternoons, and cajoled my colleagues into recording short 3-5 minute lessons on any of the modules from the list. Creating these video lessons was a wonderful experience. It was a great pleasure to edit the raw video footage, going over my colleagues' expressions in slow motion. I couldn't get the smile off my face. Not because they looked ridiculous as they feared, or because I was looking for the frame that would embarrass them no end (think Hilary Clinton), but because in slow motion, I realized just how much I like them. Voices off, their faces are mobile and compelling. I had not realized just how important this visual would be to the site, to making the site feel populated by real minds, but it is.

In the text lessons, too, I have tried to present a human voice. Most handbooks

are very dry, and so boring that many handbooks stay closed all semester, a \$75 paper weight. The lessons on the site occasionally seem a bit dry, hard to avoid it with a discussion of the uses of the period or why a fragment is not a sentence, but my goal was to write a bit like I teach, with satire, humor, high seriousness, urgency, etc. Sometimes I was successful; I will continue to think about how to liven up a discussion of the semicolon.

In the end, I am happy with the work I have done. The site does feel like a cool place to be to me; not as cool as Eminim's website or even Jimmy John's Gourmet Subs website, but I think students will understand and appreciate the layout and the organization of information, and the very human touch in the design and curriculum.

Notes:

Accessibility: The site is also accessible through an easy to read html page. The main Flash menu is offered in a Section 508 compliant format on the My 365 page (accessible from every page). Every image on the site has an alt tag. I still have to find a way a feasible plan for closed captioning the Flash videos. I have explored many unworkable alternatives. Making an alternative Quicktime version of the videos using a program to create closed captioning seems like the best bet. However, I have been advised by my college to hold off on this as the college is hiring a new compliance officer who will oversee decisions about accessibility.

Things I will never do again:

Attempt to transfer PowerPoint or Keynote files into Flash .swf files. Endless waste of time trying to get sound files in the correct format.

Record Video in Chroma Key. Way more complicated than it first appeared. Chroma Key is the filter TV stations use to film weather broadcasts. Though I was able to capture high quality dv in front of a blue screen in the college's recording studio (thanks to media production technician Yarrow Sweningsen), it looks like I would need some pretty specialized filters to eliminate jittery edges where subject meets the deleted blue background field.

Guess at the correct mode for compressing sound files. The language of sound editing is terrifying to me. I will seek an expert's help before I do any more sound work; the same goes for compressing raw digital video into a reasonably-sized .flv file. Scary language. I waded through it, but I feel certain that my files would be ridiculed by a pro.

