



Measure by measure: how WBT can help create a social online presence

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss how web-based technologies (WBT) can be applied to theater arts courses.

Design/methodology/approach – Through a review of the literature and parallels drawn between theater and online pedagogy, the paper proposes ideas for incorporating asynchronous and synchronous discussions, collaborative projects, and ways to utilize authentic and alternative assessments in addition to or in place of pen-and-paper tests.

Findings – WBT can be used as an effective enhancement to any theater course, though not in the same way for each area of theater. Almost any class can benefit from expanding the social dynamics through using asynchronous communications, but the true decision of the best way to utilize the benefits of WBT in a theater arts class is the same as for the integration into any class. The instructor must look at their own teaching style, the class objectives, and determine what usages will best enhance the learning process for the students in the particular course.

Originality/value – The paper offers insight into how WBT can help create a social online presence.

Keywords Worldwide web, Internet, Communication technologies, Distance learning, E-learning, Theater

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Distance education has been around for more than a century, in the form of postal mail correspondence, televised classes, and satellite campuses; yet there is relatively little acceptance of the internet as a medium to provide education at a distance (Curtin, 2002; Lazarus, 2003; Pierson, 2001; Shachar, 2002). Web-based technologies (WBT) in particular have expanded the interactive capabilities of distance education from solely asynchronous communication with long delays in response to highly interactive class meetings via text, e-mail, video, and more (Murphrey, 2001).

The use of technology-enhanced learning, in the form of WBT, in education at the post-secondary level has been increasing considerably, both for distance students and for those who are on-campus (Martyn, 2003; Osguthorpe and Graham, 2003). This increase has been, over the past decade, particularly evident in the use of WBT as alternative and additional methods of instruction in all areas of study. The purpose of these uses have included reductions in the barriers of time, space, and curriculum (Riffell and Sibley, 2003; Waddoups *et al.*, 2003), and changes in the way of learning (Howland and Moore, 2002; Milliron and Prentice, 2004). The American Federation of Teachers notes that the numbers of colleges and universities in the USA offering distance education courses as well as programs have grown, particularly in Internet-based courses (American Federation of Teachers, 2001).



The examination of how web-based technologies can be used to enhance social dynamics in a class can be worthy of research for the theater arts area because technology and the related pedagogical changes, such as from lecture and lecture-discussion to student-centered learning, are causing dramatic changes for the theater practitioner and the educator in general (Arndt, 1999; Mills and Ragan, 2000; Schrum, 1999). Furthermore, the computer skills learned in the hybrid course or online course can help students in other courses and in their professional lives, as well as help fill the ISTE standards for students' computer skills (Zirkle, 2003). The use of WBT in theater arts classes may help to fill these standards by providing undergraduates with a great service by changing from traditional to what is in the "real" world today (Abel, 2001). In the "real" world, theater practitioners use the internet and related technologies to communicate and to research, and they use the computer to create products; the education provided to students planning to work in the theater should prepare the students for these practices.

The enrollments in distance education nearly doubled between 1997-1998 and 2000-2001, and the number of postsecondary institutions offering distance education courses rose from 34 percent to 56 percent in this same time frame (US Department of Education, 2004). This trend has been in progress for a while, starting slowly and now occurring rapidly in the past few years (Crawford, 2003; Dabbagh and Kitsantas, 2004). However, this trend will only continue to rise as society and students expect higher education to provide the technology skills needed in the real world (Hall and Elliott, 2003).

It is projected that enrollments in online courses will continue to rise (McDonald and Turnage, 2003). This rise will cause teaching on-line to become part of routine faculty workload (Hislop and Atwood, 2000). The use of WBT will vary by discipline, with business, health sciences and education being more open to the innovation because of the use of the technologies enabling the members to work together better when they are also practicing professionals (*Distance Education Report*, 2003). Humanities departments will be less open to the use of WBT, in part, because they are less involved with technology to begin with and are not always convinced that writing can be taught online (*Distance Education Report*, 2003).

It has been found, however, that though research has been done on how many faculty in each discipline teaches using WBT, many of these data had a large standard error (US Department of Education, 2002a). Though differences were found in 1999-2000 for use of WBT by institution type, education, gender, and academic rank, once other variables (such as teaching field and part-time versus full-time status) were controlled for, no significant relationship was found (US Department of Education, 2002a). Teaching field is still a significant factor in the use of WBT, with fields such as the fine arts and social sciences being less likely than engineering/computer science to use WBT; as was the part-time status faculty less likely than the full-time status faculty (US Department of Education, 2002a).

In 1999-2000, 5.3 percent of traditional students participated in distance education (US Department of Education, 2002a). The numbers reported for students in fall 2002 are even higher. A total of 11 percent of all US higher education students in Fall 2002 took at least one online course (Allen and Seaman, 2003). The percentage of higher education students taking at least one online course was higher (13 percent) at those institutes offering online courses. From Fall 2002 to Fall 2003, the number of students

taking at least one online course was projected to increase by 19.8 percent to include a total of 1.9 million students (Allen and Seaman, 2003).

Of all institutions of higher learning, 81 percent reported offering at least one fully online or blended course in fall 2002, with 97 percent of the public institutions reporting offering at least one fully online or blended course. Yet, during the 1990s, only 8 percent of undergraduates enrolled in such classes during 1999-2000 (US Department of Education, 2002a). While only two-thirds of all schools believe that online learning is critical to their long-term strategy, a majority believes that the learning outcomes in online education are the same or somewhat superior to face-to-face education.

Students, on the whole, are welcoming to WBT, a crucial need as their positive reactions to the changing learning environment are necessary for it to succeed (Jason *et al.*, 2001). The nontraditional student is better suited to asynchronous use of WBT than a f2f class due to the lack of time and location-specific requirements (Burgon and Williams, 2003; Lee, 2002). Not only do the nontraditional students appreciate online learning, but so too does the resident student, for a variety of reasons including time restrictions, and other requirements for the time of the resident, or traditional, student (Bickle and Carroll, 2003). Resident students are often limited in time and location as well, due to work commitments, and particularly in the theater, production commitments such as to working to produce a show or performing in a show.

Students like the technology because these technical skills will help them in the “real world” – such skills as keyboarding and research skills (Dundis and Benson, 2003; Zirkle, 2003). Many universities are turning to distance education as a way to enhance on-campus learning and to prepare students to function in a “knowledge society” (Peat and Franklin, 2002). For example, in theater, collaboration has occurred for a long time, with instructors reaching out to experts and practitioners for feedback and guest lecturing; WBT make this easier and able to reach further for collaborative learning.

Faculty use of technology/internet

Specifically, the faculty in theater arts, particularly those in the theater arts subdivisions which are humanities based, tend to be more resistant to the use of WBT, in part due to the inability to convince them that writing can be taught online, and partially due to their lower involvement in technology to begin with (*Academic Leader*, 2003). This reluctance is supported by the statistics reported by NCES2002-155 (US Department of Education 2002a), that of the 3.3 percent of instructional faculty and staff teaching distance education fine arts classes, 1.5 classes were taught on average, 42.1 percent of for-credit fine arts taught via distance education – this can be compared to the design-style theater arts courses. The reluctance of the humanities style classes (i.e. theory, playwriting and criticism) is supported by the numbers reported by NCES2002-155, that of the 4.7 percent of instructional faculty and staff teaching distance education humanities classes, 1.6 classes were taught on average, 55.2 percent of for-credit humanities classes taught via distance education. The reluctance of the social sciences-type theater classes (i.e. history) is supported by the numbers reported by NCES2002-155 that of the 6.0 percent of instructional faculty and staff teaching distance education social sciences classes, 1.4 classes were taught on average, 46.9 percent of for-credit social sciences classes taught via distance education. NCES2002-155 also found that academic discipline is related to teaching

non-face-to-face classes, noting that those in the humanities (5.5 percent), fine arts (6.4 percent) and social sciences (3.7 percent) were less likely than average (9.0 percent) to teach a non-face-to-face class.

An exception in humanities is faculty in the fields of composition and rhetoric, who adapted quickly to the use of web-based technologies to enhance the writing process (Mullen, 2002). However, Nicholls and Philip (2001) in particular note the value of WBT in traditional face-to-face learning in the drama class, and NCES2002-155 supports this assertion, point out that humanities (1.7 percent), fine arts (2.0 percent) and social sciences (1.8 percent) use were close to the average use (2.2 percent) of a computer-based medium.

Advantages

The advantages of educational technology integration, in the form of WBT, in these instances can be divided into specific areas:

- discussion board participation;
- online quizzes;
- online midterms/finals;
- electronic paper and project submission;
- reading outside of the assigned textbook (including hyperlinks and electronic formatted documents);
- group project collaboration;
- dissemination of relative information as it occurs; and
- dissemination of course lecture notes created by the instructor.

Each of these methods will be discussed in general in this section.

Discussion boards

Students seem to perform better when the discussion boards (or asynchronous communication) are required, where participation is “rewarded” by a grade (Savage, 1999). This incentive of a grade brings a higher level of participation to the discussion, where students engage in dialogue begun by the instructor but often taking off on it’s own soon after (Greenlaw and DeLoach, 2003; Williams and Pury, 2002). The grading of discussion, as any class project, needs to be described to the students (Palloff and Pratt, 2001). Students become co-constructors of the materials, examine alternative viewpoints, and reach a consensus on a topic together (Williams and Pury, 2002), as well as practice writing and critical thinking (Greenlaw and DeLoach, 2003). By posing a thought-provoking discussion question in each forum, or thread, the instructor will be able to ascertain, through reading the interactions, the comprehension of the students of the material presented to help the student answer the topic of the discussion board (Greenlaw and DeLoach, 2003).

Examples of asynchronous discussion include forums for making announcements, asking questions and receiving help concerning technical issues, submitting assignments, and providing feedback and critiques to their classmates (Leh, 2002). Discussion forums can be used both before and after a class – to prepare students before the class or to carry on a discussion begun in class (Greenlaw and DeLoach,

2003), such as “Looking at the board before discussing a particular play in a class was a great way for me to tap into what the students originally felt about the material; without a message board, these kinds of insights were unavailable. I was also surprised to discover how easy it was to relate a raging debate on the board to the in-class discussion” (Converse, 1999, p. 101). Discussion forums can also be used, to have additional discussions that could not easily be held in class, such as role-playing where either the instructor or one (or a group) of students take on the persona of a character in a play and answers questions asked by the rest of the class. This can also be applied to design or performance classes, where a presented work (scene, monologue, floorplan) is shown in class, and then critiqued in the discussion board where fellow students post their critiques and the creator(s) respond to these criticisms with defense (Converse, 1999).

Discussion forums also open up the “floor” to students who might not participate in class due to various reasons such as shyness, needing more time to think and formulate a thought, or just lack of time for everyone to “have a say” (Converse, 1999; Smith *et al.*, 2001; Young, 2001). Besides enabling everyone to have their full say, the discussion forums also help to create a solid foundation for learning (Greenlaw and DeLoach, 2003; Martyn, 2003) a sense of ownership of the knowledge created, and enhance the sense of community in the class (Martyn, 2003).

The instructor benefits from the discussion forum in a variety of ways as well, such as having a record of participation by each member of the class, having time to consider a response to the student, and having an additional forum in which to address additional topics that otherwise would be ignored due to lack of time in the classroom.

Online quizzes/midterms

Online quizzes will enable the instructor to regularly assess student understanding of the materials presented (Martyn, 2003). These can be created using question banks, to help cut down on potential cheating, can be proctored if they are worth a large portion of the course grade, or can be given minimal worth in the class grade but just enough to encourage the completion of the quiz. Automatic marking is available in most WBT for single-answer questions such as multiple-choice, true/false, matching. Even if longer answers are used, the electronic use enables the test to be taken outside of the class time, and the answers are also typewritten which makes it easier for the instructor to read for marking (Thomas *et al.*, 2002).

Paper and project submission

Paper and project submission can be performed using the Digital Drop Box, or File Sharing, feature of WBT. By submitting the paper electronically, two advantages are quite obvious. The first is that the student does not need to make physical contact with a particular location in order to submit, and, second, there is less chance of the instructor losing the paper. Additionally, an electronic receipt is automatically generated when the instructor receives the submission, enabling accurate records to be kept of who submitted the assignment, and when (Thomas *et al.*, 2002). To the student, there is also the advantage of faster feedback (Martyn, 2003), and to the instructor is the advantage of being able to mark papers as they arrive rather than a whole pile at once (Martyn, 2003).

Outside readings

Reading outside of the assigned textbook can easily be arranged, and changed as events occur in the real world, or as the instructor becomes aware of items of interest. By posting hyperlinks to sources of information, and labeling them as required or recommended, the instructor can share these sources of information with students very quickly and easily at any point during the course (Horton, 2000; Palloff and Pratt, 2001).

Besides links to external sources, files can be posted that were created by the instructor as supplemental to the class such as handouts or lecture notes (Palloff and Pratt, 2001; Savage, 1999). In addition, by providing assigned readings such as articles or texts of presentations, the instructor will be adding vastly to the information provided by a single required text without causing the student to pay extortionate rates for a multitude of texts of which a single page or two are useful. If large amounts of copyrighted materials are used, then the use of the electronic reserve system at the university libraries can be utilized, for which students receive a password to a page created by the instructor in which information is made available online.

Group work/student collaboration

Group project collaboration can be eased by the use of WBT. Students can be placed into groups, each of which has access to a specific group area that only their members can utilize. In this group area, students can utilize a discussion board, file sharing, easily e-mail all members of the group, and even have a real-time chat if they wish. By providing these additional areas for groups to meet, besides face to face, group projects should be easier for students to complete and thus make the working in groups less of a lesson in tedium and scheduling and more of an academic experience.

Dissemination of relevant information as it occurs

Dissemination of relative information as it occurs, such as changes in dates, changes in assignments, or changes in lab assignments, can easily be shared with all students, by having a requirement to log in at least once a day to the course site. By utilizing the announcement feature and/or posting to a specified discussion board, the instructor can easily share changes in course content with students without requiring a wait for the next face to face meeting (Horton, 2000; Savage, 1999).

Synchronous communication (chats)

The instructor can also require an online chat with students, where the instructor provides the information in a real-time format, complete with times for questions and answers. By scheduling more than one session, or changing the time based on needs of students, the instructor will be able to better help the student to schedule around production participation.

Guest lecturers can be arranged more easily through the use of WBT. They can be arranged through one of two methods – synchronous or asynchronous. A synchronous guest lecturer would participate in an online chat with the students enrolled in the course, either as a required or elective participation activity. As described by Savage (1999, p. 210), “Taking advantage of the possibility of telecasting live from a remote site, incorporating audio or video interviews with international experts into course design . . . places the power of technology in the classroom”.

In a synchronous session, led either by the instructor or a guest lecturer, a whiteboard session could be held, “discussion can occur while graphics are annotated or brainstorming sessions are going on” (Palloff and Pratt, 2001, p. 7). An asynchronous guest lecturer could be asked to participate in a discussion board, answering questions posed by students for a specified period of time at the convenience of the students and the guest.

In either instance, distance would not be of concern when arranging for a guest lecturer, as the guest would simply need Internet access, and not be required to come to the campus (Smith *et al.*, 2001). Besides opening up the array of guests that could be arranged, this also would help the Theater Arts Department’s budget by not requiring travel of the guest lecturer, nor housing. In addition, this would enable more guest lecturers to be utilized in teaching specialized courses to the students. Guest lecturers would also be accessible to students without taking away from precious in-class time, and if asynchronous methods are used, the guest lecturer will be able to address more issues and questions than in a traditional setting. This would also enable theater arts faculty who are active in the field to teach their classes even from a distance, such as if they were needed to travel to a production meeting during term time.

Grade book

WBT not only provide instructional support and enhancement to the students, but also ways of communicating student progress to students at any given point. In other words, the use of an online grade book, in which students can check their grades online at their convenience, is a useful feature of any WBT. Besides enabling the student to check their grades, and keep track of their progress in the class at any point in time, the online grade book also enables the instructor to convey to students where they need to improve. The instructor can also save classroom time by conveying the grades to students in an online format rather than using class time. As well, there are privacy concerns with posting student grades on the office door or in other public locations – even if only identification numbers are used. By using an online grade book, the instructor is conveying the grades in a way that only the student can access their own grades and no one else’s. If the instructor wants, most online grade books also enable the disseminating of the class median and mean grade.

Applications of WBT to specific types of courses

Performance and dance

The courses that fall under the performance and dance areas by their nature require face-to-face interaction. These courses might utilize a networked learning system for discussion of topics arising each week, and possibly the provision of regular reading assignments outside of the assigned textbook and quizzes. In addition, lectures on the theories of dance and acting could be presented in a written format as course documents, limiting face-to-face meetings to the actual physical learning of the skills and techniques of the course. The courses of these types would still require regular meetings, but the time spent in the actual classroom could be cut down, making the time scheduled for the course shorter, though the amount of content would remain the same, or possibly increase as students would be better able to gain the written and technical knowledge without having to be in the classroom. Time spent in face-to-face interactions would be utilized for laboratory practice of the techniques studied, and

evaluations of such activities. Guest lecturers would especially be of interest in this field, as performers and dancers could be asked to ‘talk’ to the class, without requiring a change in schedule or travel by the professional.

Measure by
measure

History, theory, and criticism

The courses that fall under the area of history, theory, and criticism lend themselves well towards the integration of WBT. Courses of this nature will benefit greatly from the use of WBT. Students would be able to access lectures online to read, additional reading assignments such as web sites and articles as well as electronic reserve items, etc. Especially in areas with complex topics or many names, this will ease the student’s absorption of the knowledge by seeing the names. For note-taking practice the oral lecture can be recorded for students to listen to over the internet, or the chat feature of WBT can be utilized for live interaction. Alternately, the instructor can also have synchronous, in-person meetings as well where such activities can take place. Discussion board participation would offer class participation on a more even level for those students who do not think fast and cannot keep up with the fast pace of a live class discussion. Also, by having asynchronous discussions, students will be able to think, absorb, and reflect before responding to the ideas of others. The utilization of online quizzes will enable the instructor to regularly check on the comprehension of the students. Even if the student does use notes, by setting a time limit on the exam, the instructor can limit the amount of “outside help” used by a student during the assessment. Especially by using automatically graded questions, the instructor will be able to provide instantaneous feedback to the students regarding their comprehension of the materials presented in that lesson.

Group projects, such as research, would be more easily worked upon by students when they do not have to meet face to face to discuss each issue as it arises. Groups can be given areas to discuss their projects, either synchronous or asynchronous or both, such as chats, discussion boards, and/or electronic file sharing areas. By providing the students with various methods of working together, they are better able to share ideas, and are not limited to the face-to-face meetings that are hard to schedule, and are often too short to cover all areas or remember everything that was discussed. The electronic record of the meetings is also of use to the instructor, who can then grade the participation of the members of the group. As well, the instructor can review these meetings and give feedback where needed to help the students to create a better product.

The digital drop box will be of great use in collecting and returning projects submitted by students, as there will be no papers to get lost, or be claimed to have been submitted as digital receipts will be kept by WBT. Additionally, papers can be submitted when completed, rather than waiting for the next class meeting, and claims of no printers will no longer be accepted. The instructor will be able to return papers without wasting class time in the returning of papers as well.

Design and technical theater

Courses in the area of design and technical theater will by their nature need to be hybrid. However, the courses in this area really can be divided into two sub-areas for the purpose of integrating WBT into the theater arts curriculum at an academic

institution. The courses in this area will be divided, for this purpose, into design and technical theater.

Design courses require regularly scheduled meetings for the purpose of viewing and critiquing the designs created. In addition, materials and tools are needed for these courses that are not otherwise easily accessible such as drafting tables. Students can produce projects on their own time, and utilize the discussion board feature of WBT for asking questions and providing input to design/tool questions. They also can view a design online and critique it as a class in a discussion board. However, these courses can be completed totally online, with materials being scanned, or digital images created of the products, for sharing purposes.

The technical theater courses have a different focus. These courses consist of lectures, but more importantly, of lab time. The lecture portions of the course can be presented in a combination online posted lecture notes and face-to-face lectures in both the classroom and lab settings. Depending on the level of the course, the amount of classroom lecture will vary. Introductory courses, by their nature, will have more classroom meetings and lab meetings as students are introduced to a wide variety of aspects of technical theater. All lectures can be supplemented by required readings, both in the purchased text(s) as well as supplemental online resources available via WBT, including the electronic reserve system available from most academic libraries. Journals containing descriptions of and reflections on activities completed during each required lab period would be able to be completed online – utilizing the quiz feature would enable it to be submitted immediately to the instructor, or, the digital drop box can be used for a word processed submission that can later be combined by the student into a final submission of a journal for the semester. Issues arising during labs can be discussed on the WBT discussion board in required and optional threads, allowing all in the class, as opposed to only those who were in the lab at the time, to participate. By opening the discussion of issues to all students in the class, and not solely those involved at the time, there is chance for more views on the problem or situation and more discussion will occur based on the situation. Those students in technical theater classes involved in productions will be able to participate in these meetings both in person and online using the file sharing and DB features of WBT.

Media and technology

Despite the name of the final area, media and technology, this area is not envisioned as being open to total usage of WBT. Coursework requires special software available in the theater department's computer lab and special instruction in the use of the technologies. However, as with other areas, the discussion board can be used to discuss issues as they arise between the face-to-face meetings. The digital drop box might be used to submit assignments to the instructor and assigned supplemental readings and web sites of use might be posted on the WBT. Quizzes can be utilized to assess comprehension of concepts presented in class.

Conclusions

In conclusion, WBT can be used as an effective enhancement to any theater course, though not in the same way for each area of theater. Almost any class can benefit from expanding the social dynamics through using asynchronous communications, but the true decision of the best way to utilize the benefits of WBT in a theater arts class is the

same as for the integration into any class. The instructor must look at their own teaching style, the class objectives, and determine what usages will best enhance the learning process for the students in the particular course.

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