The Internet’s Influence

1. How is it used for communicating, learning, and teaching? Is this current use satisfactory to all parties involved—instructors/teachers, students/clients, parents/community (if applicable).

At the University of Puerto Rico in Mayagüez, the professors, students, and administrative personnel that use the Internet or the Web generally do so for the following purposes:

- communication through email and messenger chatting
- presentation of WebPages
- instruction through WebCT
- tools for research, information, and resources
- access to online library resources
- employment of personal tasks

Although every professor has space on the university server, only a small fraction uses the space. A small percentage provide everything from complex pages furnished with diverse internal links for academic information such as a CV, syllabi, documents, study modules, research tools, and external links; but the majority supply simple and brief pages with standard information such as professor’s office hours, and semester courses; or they have no page at all.

The professors who do not have Web pages are perfectly satisfied with conforming to the traditional hard-copy method of communication distribution. Although workshops and training are offered throughout the academic year, low numbers attend. It is no wonder this island has a major garbage problem with no recycling program!

For the past year, the Arts and Sciences faculty is providing more and more inter-office information through their Web page and internal emails. However, in the faculty meetings, various professors have requested that hard copies of the documents and inter-office memos be distributed as well. They argue that electronic copies are hard to read, and since few departments have printers for the faculty, printing documents is an added expense to the professor. Many have not even set-up their email accounts, and have no interest in doing so.

Students, on the other hand, value the Web for a vast assortment of purposes. Students matriculate each semester through the university hyper terminal, communicate through chat and email, visit e-bay (their favorite) regularly, and perform the majority of their research through the Internet. Three years ago, students grumbled when I mentioned virtual learning environments, communication through email, and electronic document submittal. Now, I rarely hear any objection.

Internet research is the students’ main means for obtaining information. Although they use the online library, they prefer to search the Web to find their resources. My lesson, “Evaluating Web Sites Wisely” has contributed to students being more critical of a site. However, they still trust unreliable sites and assume that if it’s on the Net, it’s legitimate.
WebCT has been very useful for my courses. Students enjoy writing their discussions, posting work, and communicating with each other even though they see each other every two days. They also refer regularly to the calendar as a reminder for their assignments.

One tool on WebCT that I have found challenging to students is the Homepage tool. Although the Homepage options on WebCT are archaic, students have experimented with it, and developed fabulously colorful and imaginative pages. This is done through constructing their work on PowerPoint, changing the dimensions of the page to make the slide wider and longer, creating their page by adding images and text, saving the page first as as a .ppt extension (in case they want to alter it later on), and then as a .jpg. Then, they upload the jpg of the slide as a banner on WebCT. The students themselves explored and developed this method, and it is a very effective and easy way of presenting themselves to their peers.

As far as the Department, that’s another story. The Department of English has a Web Page, as do all departments and faculties of the University. The page, housed on the English department’s server, is almost impossible to access. The servers need total revamping, and until then, accessing the page is slow and many times impossible. Due to lack of a Web Master, the page is not maintained regularly, information is outdated, and many internal links are dead.

The department servers also provide email to the professors. Again, because of the handicapped servers’ infrastructure, the Web mail server is down 95% of the time. However, there are no funds for improving the system, so nothing at all gets accomplished with either the Web page or the Web mail.

The recommendation of the Faculty’s central Computer Center is that our Department transfer both the Web page and Web mail to the University servers to reduce the overload on our servers. The chair of the department is against this idea and believes that the department should have its own site, autonomous and independent from the university’s main servers. Yet, we have no personnel to maintain the system, so the system is always down. This attitude defeats the potential of the department for disseminating information to students and faculty reliably. This arrogance regresses our prospective for progress.

So, the future is somewhat nebulous. The more advanced we become; the deeper we fall when things go wrong. Now, during an election year, everything freezes until the next governor takes charge. With each new administration in office, all the bureaucrats that hold “confidential” posts (President, Chancellors, Deans, Directors) must submit their resignations. With that, the cycle begins all over again.

The current use of the Internet and the Web needs improvement. We’re ready for the new cycle to begin.
2. **How will Internet use in your workplace likely change in the near-to-moderately near future? What are the forces that will drive that change?**

In the moderately near future, I expect only a gradual change. The Internet will increase in value for communication between professors, departments, faculties, and students. Again, gradually, virtual learning environments will gain more acceptance as a means of distributing material to students, posting materials and presentations, and disseminating general communication within academia.

I do not see my courses ever given fully online. Even if technology allows for a virtual, audio-visual classroom; as a teacher, the dynamic of a real physical relationship between the students and me is essential. ESL students need to read, write, speak, and listen to English regularly; the only consistent, reliable English in their lives is from their classes with me. The students look forward to this association, feedback, and communication with their peers and me, as much as I seek it from them. The Internet is a tool, and will never be capable of fully replacing ESL classes.

I think that in the near future, the university will look more closely into Open Source and freeware software in computing. The university spends $50 K annually just for WebCT; yet we have the finest engineering school on the island. Students studying computer engineering are valuable resources that can help us work towards lowering costs, and producing a more self-reliant product.

Society spends millions of dollars investing in software, operating systems, and computer upgrades to find that almost instantly; “bigger and better” programs and equipment have replaced them. Technology is becoming disposable, wasteful, and expendable; society is allowing and promoting this. New technology is replacing old technology, and old technology is taking less time to become obsolete. Open source and freeware are directions I think the University will consider more closely in the near future. The major changes that I hope will drive the change will be based on economy and practicality.

**2b. Are you comfortable that your workplace is "heading in the right direction" (and at the right speed) with regard to its use of the Internet?**

I am fairly comfortable and optimistic that my workplace is moving in the right direction with the Internet. There is a consensus here in Puerto Rico that our system lags 20 years behind the United States. Interestingly, last Friday I attended a conference in San Juan on Web Education. One of the speakers presented a noteworthy statistic: Only 16% of the Puerto Rican population has access to, and uses the Internet. It will definitely take a longer time for the Internet to become a household item in Puerto Rico.

The forward movement is slower than in the States. In a way, this is positive since we see the effects of change in the U. S. and “learn from the mistakes.” In my workplace, for many, the Internet is a household item, but we are definitely an elite group.
The Internet is a tool, as technology is a tool. The right use of this tool allows it to be extremely valuable. However, as with anything, it requires conscientious and sensible treatment. Technological tools will simplify and accelerate the efforts of humans, but they will never replace humans. My workplace recognizes the value of the Internet, but by no means does it intend for it to overwhelm and invade the curriculum.