



Teaching Context

I teach level one ABE twenty hours per week at Ysleta Community Learning Center, which offers ABE, GED, ESL, Citizenship and Vocational training. My students are mostly women between 28 and 50 years old, mothers and grandmothers who want more and see education as a way to get it. Many have learned English during adulthood, and look to my class to continue to improve their skills. Some have lost jobs and are looking for a way to a better income. Others are employed but find their service-industry jobs inadequate to meet their needs. A basic skills class, level one has a high rate of turnover for two reasons. Of students leaving the class, about 30% move to the level two class within a month to six weeks. The others leave for reasons ranging from job or family demands to health problems. Some simply go away with no explanation.

Problem

I wanted my students to do regular research projects on topics we were reading about in class. Since our campus is without a library, I thought we would do our research online. I assumed that the students would be able to find information using Google or some other search engine. When we got to the lab, however, I found that very few of the students knew how to access the internet to do more than visit MySpace or download music. Many had trouble

entering the URLs I had given them as resources. Some had never touched a computer before. I spent an entire class coaching individual students just to get them on the internet, and ended up abandoning the project.

I knew I had to teach a formal lesson on accessing the internet to do work for class. I planned to just start working small internet lessons into my class and see what happened. Then I signed up for the Master Teacher Academy and the means to my end was clear.

Research Question

“What happens when students receive instruction in basic internet skills?”

Action Learning Plan

I first wanted to know what things are important when teaching adults to use the internet. Jakob Nielsen’s article “Lower Literacy Users” (Nielsen, 2005) explained that most websites are written at too high a level for the average adult learner, and that popups and the dancing graphics common to the web create distractions which often cause lower literacy users to quit looking or to select the first option they are given. My students would need skills to help them sort through the distracters to find what they were looking for. In “Choosing and Using Web Sites for Literacy Instruction”, Hacker reviews the work being done to help instructors determine which websites are appropriate for adult literacy students. Since literally anything can be published on the web, teachers should take care that the sites they select fit the students they are teaching. (Hacker, 2000).

If my plan was to be useful, I knew I had to get my students’ cooperation. In class I asked them why they thought our first project had gone so badly. One lady spelled it out, “You thought we could find things online, but we don’t know how.” Many of their comments echoed the sentiment that they hadn’t the first idea how to do what I was asking for. So I decided to go

with basic information which I thought would help them feel more at ease and give them a general understanding of what they were looking at online. I found a series of short tutorials on the Ohio State University Libraries site which fit the bill. (Getting Started on the WEB) I also decided, since the fall semester was almost over, to wait and start fresh in January.

Once the new semester was underway, I brought up the idea of doing some internet skills lessons in class. First I gave the class a pretest and a self assessment form to help me understand both their knowledge and their feelings about the internet and computers in general. After a detailed description in class that had me drawing a webpage on the board to show where you type in the 'www' address, we went to the lab for the first time. Most of the students got to the OSU Libraries site on their own. ("Getting Started on the Web). I assumed this was because of the coaching done with the first project attempt. Over the next 3 lab sessions, the class worked through the tutorial at this site, taking notes and asking questions as needed. At the end of February, the class took a posttest and survey identical to the pretest/survey done at the beginning of the semester.

Findings and Conclusions

Pretest scores ranged from very low (20% correct) to relatively high (90% correct) spread fairly evenly over the participants. Posttest scores indicate that students did gain some knowledge from the tutorial, with greater than 60% of the class scoring 90 or better on the test. The results of the pre- and post- survey were more surprising. Student confidence actually decreased after the training, with more students rating themselves as 'not confident' than initially had. However, in discussing the project with the class, student comments about the experience belied their on-paper evaluation. "I feel good about the internet now." and "My skills are better. Now I know you have to do certain things to find what you want." were among their statements.

This suggests to me that although the students were encouraged by what they had learned, they also became more aware of how much they still need to learn.

This type of class activity would have been better done within the space of a week, followed by other short-duration lessons on dealing with common internet distractions, using search engines, and dealing with printing problems. To be really effective, internet skills instruction should be an ongoing part of the student's class experience. Although younger students may be very able to navigate to websites within their specific field of interest, they also need instruction to be successful completing academic research on the internet.

Resources and References

Getting Started On the WEB. Retrieved December 9, 2006, from Ohio State University Libraries net.TUTOR Web site: [Http://liblearn.osu.edu.tutor](http://liblearn.osu.edu.tutor)

Hacker, Emily (2000, December). Choosing and Using Web Sites for Literacy Instruction. Retrieved December 9, 2006, from Focus on Basics Web site: <http://www.ncsall.net>

Neilsen, Jakob (2005, March 14). Lower Literacy Users. Retrieved December 9, 2006, from www.useit.com Web site: <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20050314.html>

Appendix

Pre-test

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. A web site is like
 - a. A book in a library
 - b. A confusing maze
 - c. A doctor's waiting room
2. A home page is
 - a. Where the homies are
 - b. A starting point for a web site
 - c. A paper with a picture of a home on it
3. URL stands for
 - a. Uniform Resource Locator
 - b. Underneath Room Location
 - c. Undefined Runner Location
4. A hyperlink
 - a. lets you jump from one web page to another
 - b. dances around all over the computer page
 - c. can't sit still
5. A browser
 - a. is someone who wanders through the mall looking but not buying anything
 - b. is software that helps you use the internet
 - c. is an evil character in an electronic game
6. Three kinds of hyperlinks are
 - a. text, graphic, and image map
 - b. first, second, and third
 - c. open, closed, and blind
7. You can identify a hyperlink because
 - a. The pointer changes and the status bar shows the URL
 - b. It can't sit still
 - c. The computer begins to play music when you touch it
8. You should enter the URL for a web page
 - a. in the address slot
 - b. wherever it will fit
 - c. only if a teacher says to do so
9. Some basic browser functions are
 - a. stop, refresh/reload, home, and back
 - b. sing, dance, cook, and clean
 - c. pause, reopen, and close
10. True or false. You can use the properties box or the resize to change the size of a window.

Student Self-Assessment

Name: _____

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---------------|--------------------|-----------|----------------|--------|
| Not confident | Somewhat confident | Confident | Very Confident | Expert |

1 2 3 4 5

Using the scale above, assign a number to answer each question.

1. How do you feel about computers? ____
2. How do you feel about using the internet? ____
3. How do you feel about doing schoolwork on the computer? ____
4. How do you feel about using the internet for schoolwork? ____
5. How do you feel about using a computer for personal purposes? ____
6. How do you feel about using the internet for personal purposes? ____
7. How do you feel about your ability to learn more about computers? ____
8. How do you feel about your ability to learn more about the internet? ____