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# Managing a Web-based Literature Course for Undergraduates

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by Jeffrey L. Merron

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"During this class," a student wrote to me, "I have discovered something about this medium that I had never noticed before. I have found that the bulletin board environment is more conducive to learning and discussion than any environment that I've been exposed to, including video, chat, and the traditional classroom setting. It allows students to interact in an intelligent, organized, and logical manner. We can enter at our leisure, contemplate the issues discussed, and develop a thoughtful experience."

I received this unsolicited and unexpected comment about a third of the way through a summer class in 1998. The student, a Business Information Systems major taking one of his last classes before end-of-summer graduation, wrote this without conceivable motive: He was not a journalism major, I had never met him face-to-face, his grade for the class would have little significance on his academic record. The only rationale I could think of for this comment was: This student was excited about learning. Five years of student comments on classes had never turned up a gem like this one. What had I done?

I taught a course on-line.

## **An overview of Web-based teaching using WebCT**

In 1998, I had the opportunity to experiment with using WebCT, an on-line teaching package, in three journalism courses. [Detailed information about WebCT, including access to a sample course, can be found at [<http://www.webct.com/webct/webct.html>](http://www.webct.com/webct/webct.html)]. In one course, the program supplemented traditional classroom materials. In a second, the program was used more extensively, but the class still met in a classroom weekly. In the third, the class met only on-line. I would recommend using some kind of generic software (many packages perform the same functions as WebCT) as a teaching tool for journalism instructors.

WebCT is a teaching module that works within a web browser (it works best with Netscape Navigator, and serviceably with Internet Explorer). It provides the instructor and students with many capabilities—the ability to post documents in HTML format, the ability to create a document file that students can easily download, a grade tracking module, and a calendar. Most useful, however, are the parts of the program that facilitate interchange between students and professor: e-mail and bulletin boards. The e-mail function is simple and would be familiar to anyone who uses any e-mail package, but it is powerful because it allows you to easily correspond with either an individual, a group of students, or the entire class without having to collect and compile each student's e-mail address. The e-mail is contained only within the program, and is specific to the class; there is no @ appended to the student's name because the program knows where the student will pick up mail for the class.

The bulletin board enables the professor and students to post thoughts, comments, exercises, papers, and so on in a public forum. WebCT enables you to create multiple boards; I've had success with subject-specific bulletin boards and with easily-created semi-private boards, where small groups of students can post.

Perhaps the best part of the bulletin board system, from a pedagogical point of view, is that it forces students to write. In the summer of 1998, I taught a course entitled "Literary Journalism" entirely on-line, and the bulletin board, by the end of the seven-week class, contained more than 700 postings, which when printed out ran to about 330 double-spaced pages—a prodigious output for a class of 16 students (see Figure 1). Although some of these postings were off subject and some focused on where to hold an end-of-course party, most postings were substantive comments or questions about the subject matter.

What was most interesting—and pleasing—to me, however, was the quality of the bulletin board postings and the richness and intimacy of the on-line classroom environment. This experience seems to be common among those who have taught and learned on-line. Greg Kearsley, who teaches at Nova Southeastern University's Fischler Center for the Advancement of Education, writes:

"People who have little or no experience with online learning or teaching tend to harbor some misconceptions (which are quickly cleared up after actual participation in online classes). The most common misconception is that online classes will be fairly sterile and impersonal. But once a person starts to interact with other group members, they quickly discover that an online learning environment can be very rich and very personal...People typically find that they are drawn into the subject matter of the class much more deeply than in a traditional course because of the discussions they get involved in." (Kearsley, 1998)

Throughout the term, we discussed one book each week; students could log on to the class from wherever they wanted, whenever they wanted, and participate in an "asynchronous" discussion of the reading material. Although students were required to contribute at least one "original" post and one "response" post each week, many contributed much more; the average student posted 20 times in four weeks. About half of the postings were substantial reflections on course material or on the comments and questions of other students and the professor, and from a subjective standpoint the discussion on the bulletin board reached and sustained a level of quality that is rare in the classroom setting.

Why would this be so? Several hypotheses are worth exploring:

1. The medium forces students to take time to think before and during their participation. Although the ability to edit posts is limited to simple deletion, the student does have time to reflect and revise what has been written before posting it for all to see on the bulletin board.
2. Students recognize the bulletin board as a place where their thoughts and work is "published." The essential difference between writing in "real world" classrooms and cyberspace is that "in cyberspace, everything is written for publication." (Ferris, 1997) There is at least a semi-permanence to their remarks, and therefore they are more likely to take care about what they say, since once it's "out there" on the bulletin board, they can't "take it back." (although the professor can delete comments, if necessary). Early researchers in student use of bulletin boards also noted this phenomenon. "If used effectively, CMC [computer-mediated communications] encourages and motivates students to become involved in authentic projects and to write for a real audience of their peers or persons in the larger world community, instead of merely composing assignments for the teacher." (Berge and Collins, 1995)
3. The technical challenges inherent in on-line bulletin boards just a few years ago have been eliminated by programs like WebCT, allowing students to focus on reading, writing, and thinking while at the computer, rather than the enabling applications themselves. Just a few years ago, on-line teaching pioneers wrote that "the learning curve, with regard to learning the system and the technical 'how tos' of the computer and telecommunications, can be steep." (Berge and Collins)
4. Finally, students can't see each other. They can't get by on good looks (or a sharp wit) alone, and they know it. Although the use of emoticons, or punctuation used to express emotions or intention, can enrich on-line discourse, there is "a protective ignorance surrounding a person's social roles, rank, and status. Further, it is impossible to know if another person took several hours to draft a one-screen response, or several minutes." (Berge and Collins)

Using a package like WebCT provides other possibilities. In my "Literary Journalism" course, for example, a "visiting professor" from Penn State University, 800 miles to the northwest of my university, participated throughout the summer. He teaches a similar class at Penn State, and was able to contribute his considerable expertise in the subject matter at his convenience. Students reported that they enjoyed having a second professor's perspective, and that it was a professor from a different, and distant, university, may have lent a novelty aspect.

In addition, an author of one of the books we read participated in the discussion of her work. She logged into the classroom three times during the week we covered her book, and answered students' questions regarding both the books content and her experiences as a journalist and author. The author, who is of some fame and in demand as a public speaker, agreed to participate because it was convenient for her to do so: she didn't have to leave home, she didn't need any special software, and she didn't need to formally prepare. A visiting author or journalist is not unusual for a typical class, but it is usually difficult to arrange visits with little advance scheduling; in this case, the author agreed to participate after being contacted only a week before the class began discussing her book. Arranging her visit to a physical classroom would likely have required much more lead time, and may not have been possible.

Students were overwhelmingly positive about the on-line literary journalism class. In response to open-ended questions asked at the end of the course, all of the students wrote that, if offered the opportunity, they would take an on-line class again. A few students specifically requested notification of all on-line classes when they became available. Students were also positive about:

1. The ability to log on anytime, anywhere;

2. The quality of class discussion;
3. The breadth of discussion—many students who may not have participated in a traditional classroom did participate on-line;
4. The convenience of accessing class-related materials (handouts) via the web.

Of the 16 students, seven responded to the survey as posted (several other responses were narrative evaluations that did not fit the survey format). Of the seven, five wrote that they were more likely to participate on-line than they would have in a classroom, while two said their level of participation was about the same as in a traditional classroom. Even more heartening was that all of the seven respondents believed that their participation was of a higher quality than it would have been in a traditional setting. One student wrote:

I think the discussion went better than if we had been in a classroom. It's easy to talk to a machine, and since most of us are writers, it's easier to write sometimes than to talk. You're not afraid of how the machine will look back at you when you write and post a message. Sometimes in class, students might not respond to a comment because they may be embarrassed or think they may be embarrassed.

Another student wrote, "I think that it is easier to express my views when I am not in front of everyone."

The students generally attributed their better performance to the bulletin board discussion format. One wrote, "I think more clearly when I type, and that combined with the ability to review other posts over and over really helped improve my comments. It let me think about things before I just ran my mouth."

Students also seemed to rate each others' class participation performance highly. One of the survey questions asked students to consider if they had learned from classmates as well as from the teacher. Five of the students responded strongly in the affirmative. One wrote, "I learned so much from other people. Sometimes, I would not understand or pick up on something I read, but one of my classmates would, and then they would point it out with me."

### **Teaching Classes Partially On-Line as Preparation for a Fully On-Line Class**

About six months before this course was taught, I first taught a course partially on-line. This was our intermediate journalism course, Writing and Reporting for Newspapers II, and I decided to have the students meet once a week in a computer lab, and once a week on-line. This experiment had several purposes: the most immediate one was to foster greater participation in the 8 a.m. class. As most professors know, 8 a.m. is not the most functional time for most undergraduate students. My hypothesis was that in a lab-oriented class, many exercises could—and should—be done in solitude and at a time when a student felt alert, and that given some flexibility in turning in assignments, they would do well. In fact, this turned out to be the case. Students not only performed as well or better as they have in other lab-based classes, they also seemed to enjoy the on-line environment. Many of the students had used the internet very little before this class, and were hesitant when I unveiled my plan the first week of class; by the end of the term, most felt comfortable with the on-line tools and, almost as a side effect, felt that they had learned to use the Web better as a writing, research, and reporting tool. One example of the latter is that some students who had only used e-mail for personal correspondence, if at all, started to use e-mail as a reporting tool, and got timely, intelligent responses from sources who otherwise may have been disinclined to take time to be an interview subject for a student reporter.

The second, and wholly unintended benefit of teaching this first class partially on-line is that I familiarized about a dozen students with on-line teaching and learning. West Georgia has a small communications department, and of this dozen, about half signed up for the on-line class two quarters later. Several commented that if they had not been familiar with "how it worked" that they would not have even considered signing up for the class.

The third benefit was that I familiarized myself with tools that I would be using later. The on-line materials started out mostly as "shovelware"—course materials like the syllabus, assignments, and handouts were made available on-line. Within a few weeks, students were submitting assignments via the WebCT e-mail module, and I was returning comments to them via e-mail. I was able to respond with greater detail than if I had been looking over their shoulder in the lab setting, and a bonus was that my comments, usually scrawled almost unintelligibly in a marginal scrawl, were now neatly typewritten.

About halfway through the 10-week term, we had our first on-line discussion using the "Bulletin Board" module. This was at about time the Monica Lewinsky story was breaking, and I had students examine a major daily newspaper's coverage of the story for one day. Students examined the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *The*

*Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *The Boston Globe*, and posted their qualitative content analysis on the bulletin board. Then, much to my surprise, they began to discuss the coverage, and the political events, intelligently and at length. The heart of WebCT revealed itself in a disarmingly simple module—one that allowed the students and the professor to exchange thoughts, comments, questions, and ideas asynchronously through a "threaded" discussion. In fact, the power of the tool was instantly recognizable, as the students seemed to be as excited about the discussion as I was; more than 100 thoughtful postings were made on a day's news coverage before the discussion faded away, a remarkable result.

It was after this experience that it became clear that the bulletin board, with its simple interface and intuitive functions, would be the heart of the summer on-line class. For the next few years, this may even be the "killer app" of distance education in the humanities—not fancy graphics, not multimedia, but asynchronous discussion. The beauty of the application is that it truly requires no more development time than a classroom-based discussion, removing one of the largest barriers for faculty who have heavy teaching loads and little technical or teaching assistance available for extensive course development.

### **Promotion of a Web Course to Undergraduates**

My course was the second at my university to be taught as a "web-only" class; the other, which had ended six months before, was a graduate-level class taught by the state's teacher of the year—his course required little promotion and had a ready audience of adult distance learners. My undergraduate offering faced several hurdles—it competed for students with other summer classes, and the university required a minimum of 15 students for the course to be taught. Yet, in a typical chicken-egg scenario, students might be reluctant to sign up for a course that might be cancelled right at the beginning of the semester. So my goal was to get a half-dozen or so students to sign up on the first day of registration, and to create a "buzz" about the class even before registration began. As mentioned earlier, previous students who had participated in the partial on-line class signed up early, after it was suggested that their early commitment would probably ensure that the class would, indeed, be offered, and that hesitation on their part might take the course off the books.

The course was promoted in course in two ways: on the Internet, a course page with a flashy "splash" screen was set up; this screen led to further details about the class, pointing students to information about the readings, assignments, and also to a WebCT tutorial and information page. Fliers were also posted with the web address of this page, and a link to the promotional page was placed on the department's home page. Efforts to publicize the course through advertising in a local newspaper and through the distance education office did not prove fruitful. The course had 20 slots, and by the end of the first week of summer pre-registration most of these slots were filled; two days prior to the start of summer term, students had to be signed into the class because the enrollment had reached its limit. By the time the enrollment "shook out" a couple of weeks into the term, 16 students were in the class, and participating in an invigorating discussion of our first two readings. Recent research indicates that this number of students falls in the optimum range of 12-20 students for an on-line course. (Boettcher, 1998)

### **Learning Outcomes**

By the end of the course, most of the students seemed to have a clear understanding of literary journalism as a genre. In addition, the writing and reporting methods used by authors seemed to be successfully conveyed, with the guest instructor and guest author making significant contributions in this area.

Only one or two students in the course were print journalism majors; most were mass communications majors with concentrations in broadcast, and some of the students were from other majors (English and Business, specifically). As a result, most had little interest in becoming literary journalists, and only rarely did the discussion ever turn to how to use the writing and reporting techniques in other journalism work.

Students learned about subjects that they had not been exposed to before, or saw subject matter from a very different perspective than that taught in other classes. For example, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* provided a snapshot of the drug culture of the 1960s that most of the students were unfamiliar with; similarly, although all of the students had a general historical knowledge of the civil rights movement in the south, few understood the difficulties and complexities of integration before reading *Praying for Sheetrock*; many students seemed to think about environmental issues in new ways after reading *A Civil Action*.

Many of the students expressed at the end of the course that they wanted to continue exploring the genre on their own, and asked for reading recommendations from the instructor; some expressed regret that, with a return to a full class schedule in the fall, they would not have time to read books for pleasure.

Students expressed their excitement about the possibilities of on-line learning throughout the summer term, both through e-mail sent to the instructor and postings on the bulletin board; students also recognized that web-based instruction helped them become better active, self-directed learners. Many students commented that they were surprised at how time-consuming reading postings from other students turned out to be, but that they felt compelled to read the postings because they were interesting and often they wanted to respond to individual posts. About half of the students made direct reference to on-line resources provided by the Instructor, and about four did independent research and included reference URLs in their postings.

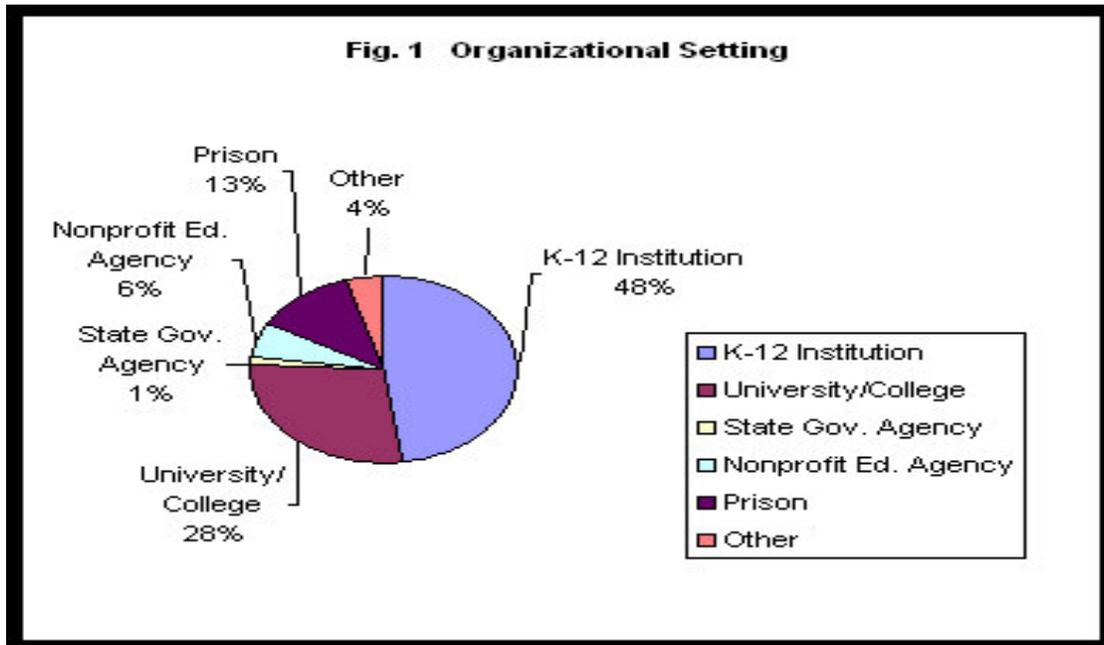
Most of the students expressed complex and ambiguous thoughts much more clearly than they would, or could have, in a "real world" classroom. As a journalism professor who is especially conscious of incorrect grammar, spelling, and punctuation, however, I had to relax my attitude in the bulletin board environment. I stressed the importance of clear and careful writing early in the course, but wrote few comments about poorly-written postings—to do so would have detracted from the "thread" of the discussions. I am also a believer in the "the more you write, the better you write" philosophy, and believed that more discussion was, in this case, necessarily better discussion. Although there has not yet been a definitive study on whether computers improve writing skills, anecdotal evidence from professors who use similar bulletin board setups suggests that this is the case. (Carter, 1998)

## Discussion

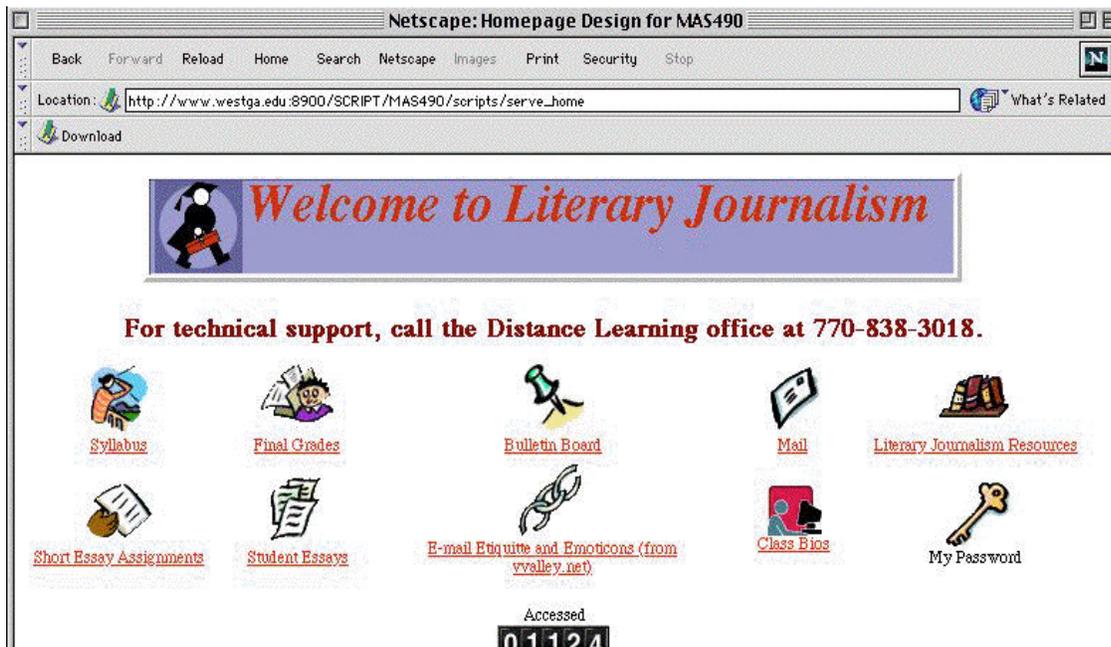
While it is always difficult to pinpoint the methods that contribute to the "success" of a class, seven factors seem to have contributed most to the success of this on-line course:

1. In promoting the class, I made a clear outline of the reading schedule, requirements, and expectations well in advance of registration. The web page I set up made it clear that only motivated students willing to experiment need apply.
2. The course structure was simple: the class would read one book a week; each student would be required to post at least two thoughtful comments to bulletin board each week; each week three or four students would "lead" the class discussion by writing a short essay in response to question(s) provided by the instructor in advance; and one medium-length paper would be due at the end of the course, with students having a choice to write about one of two books. Other experienced professors report success with a similar format. One asks students to complete weekly assignments which they post on a conference area. "Since everyone could see everyone else's responses, students could learn from each other. Indeed, I would actively encourage this by assigning some portion of the grade for explicit comments relating to other students' responses." (Kearsley, 1998) Finally, the grading structure was simple: class participation, measured by quality and quantity of posts to the bulletin board, counted for half of the student's grade; the short essay for 15 percent, and the final paper for 35 percent.
3. Although WebCT enables the instructor to establish multiple bulletin boards, I decided to use one bulletin board only—in previous classes students had become confused about switching between bulletin boards.
4. The course was fully asynchronous. There would be no requirement to be any place at any time. The advantage to this was that students, who were required to post both original thoughts and responses to other students' posts, spent a lot of time thinking about the material and questions posed to them. Typically, a traditional classroom discussion might elicit two or three responses to a question; many discussion "threads" in "Literary Journalism" went on for several weeks and included dozens of thoughtful posts from about half of the class. One thread, for example, began on July 22 and ended on July 23; it was composed of 23 posts by 13 students, the visiting professor, and the instructor; another had 19 posts by 7 students and the instructor; a third had 28 posts by 10 students and the instructor. Kearsley argues that the bulletin board situation "also accommodates students who have difficulty expressing themselves in a spontaneous classroom setting." (Kearsley, 1998) I knew many of the students prior to the beginning of the class, and my experience was similar—many of the students who did not speak up in classroom settings participated frequently in the bulletin board discussion.
5. Outside guests were solicited to contribute to the class. These included the author of one of the books and a visiting professor from Penn State University.
6. Technically simple on-line tools that required a short learning curve prevented computer neophytes from being discouraged, and enabled all students to focus on course material, rather than course delivery methods.
7. Excellent technical support—via the university's distance education office—was available 9-5 Monday through Friday. The course's home page included prominently displayed the technical support phone number. Students were discouraged from asking the professor technical questions, which can be frustrating for both parties—the students

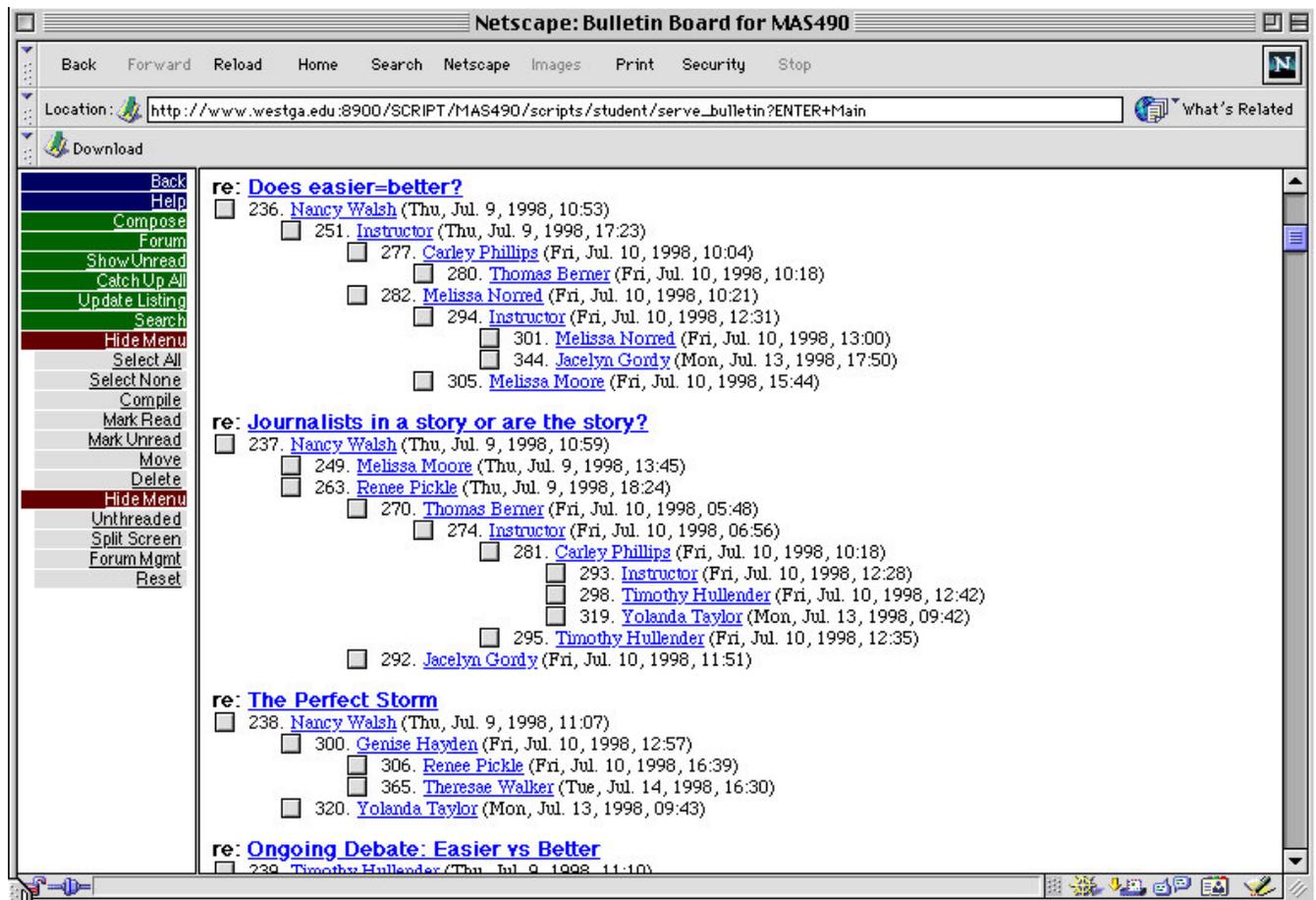
when the professor can not provide needed help, and the professor when answering questions not related directly to the course material.



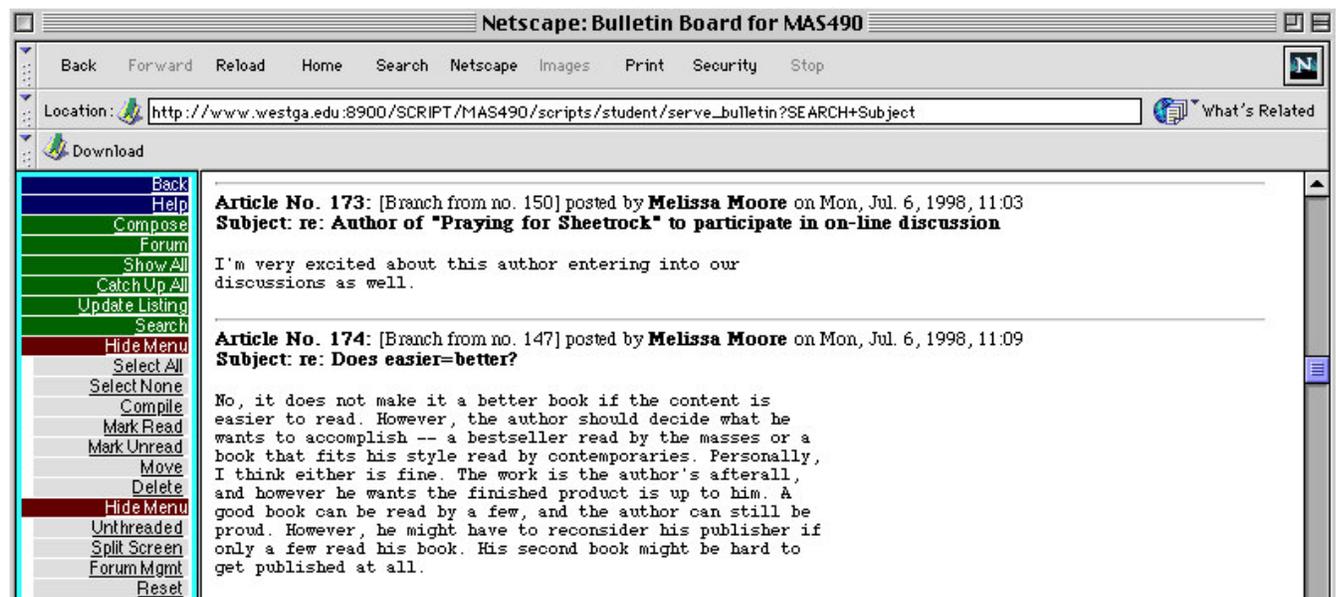
**Figure 1:** The average number of posts by each student was 36.5, and the median was also 36.5. The most posts by a student was 84; the fewest was 7. Other statistics: a) Total words posted—82,449, or about 330 double-spaced pages (calculated at 250 words/page); b) Total words posted by Instructor—9,706, or about 39 pages; c) Total words posted by Guest Instructor: 5,761, or about 23 pages; d) Total words posted by Guest Author: 2,386, or about 10 pages; e) Total words posted by students: 64,596, or about 258 pages (average 16 pages per student); f) Average number of words per student post: 110 (or about 1/2 page). [This was calculated by subtracting headers of postings (which included a subject heading, name of poster, date, and thread) from the total number of words posted. The average header was 22 words long. A typical header: "Article No. 267: [Branch from no. 178] posted by Alton DuBard on Thu, Jul. 9, 1998, 22:28 Subject: re: The Perfect Storm"]

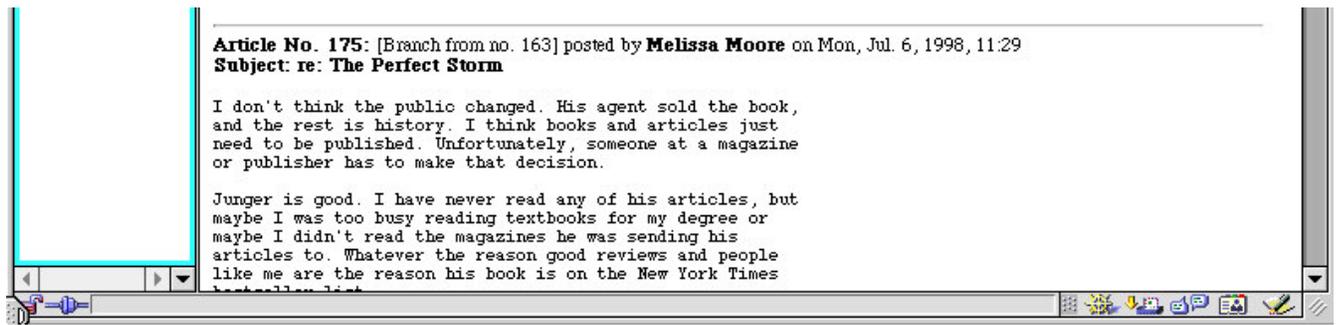


**Figure 2:** Each time a student logged in, the first thing he or she saw was the course's home page.

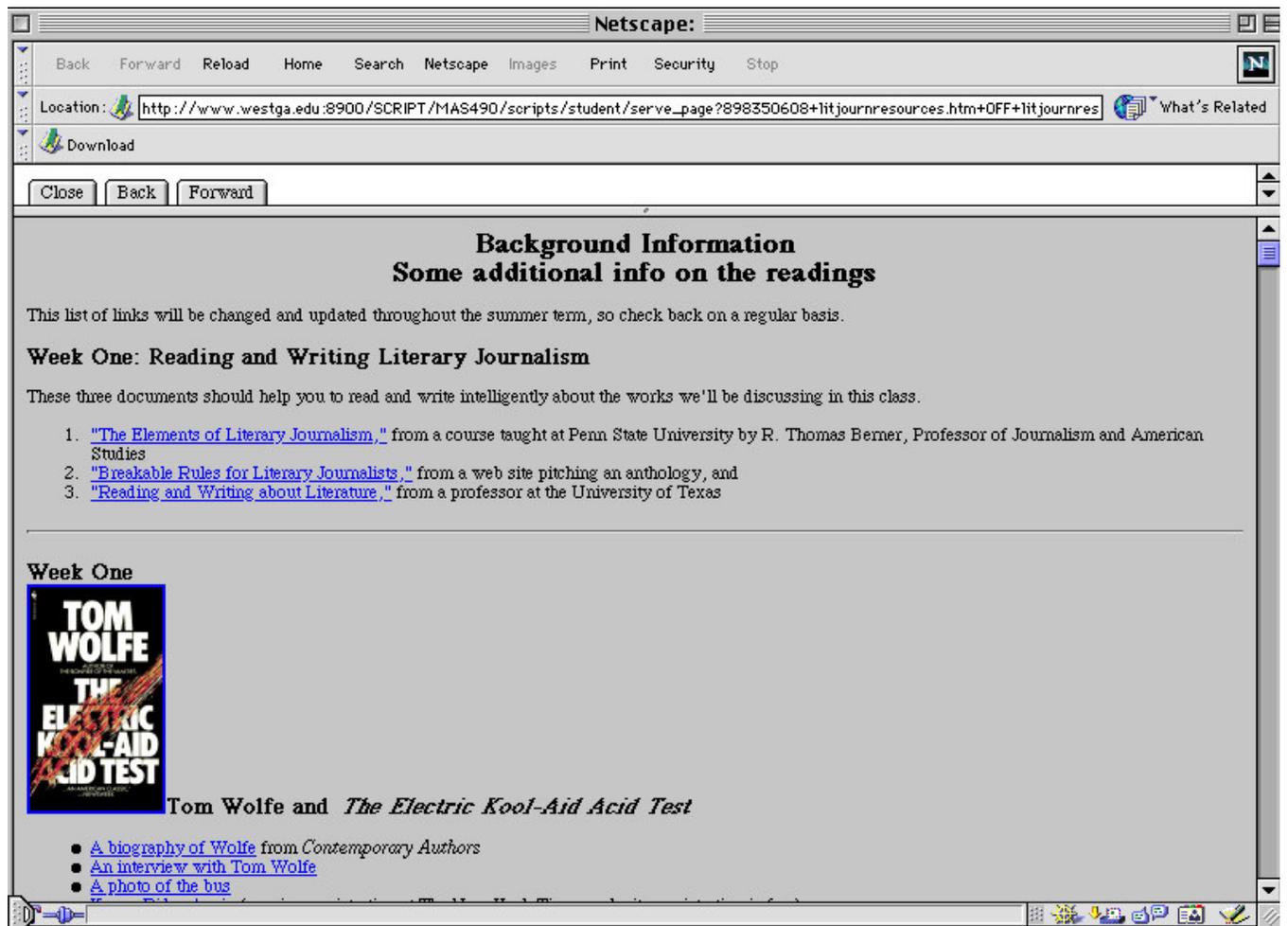


**Figure 3:** WebCT's bulletin board was the heart of the on-line class, enabling simultaneous threaded discussions on a variety of topics.





**Figure 4:** WebCT enables the instructor to easily compile postings made by each student.



**Figure 5:** As the course progressed, background resources from the Internet and from the school's password-protected on-line reference offerings were posted.

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[\*Back to Journal of Distance Learning Administration Contents\*](#)