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The Net Result: Enthusiasm for Exploring the Internet

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Tutorial

The Net Result: Enthusiasm for Exploring the Internet

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What began as a vision and committee charge from the dean of libraries at Western Kentucky University (WKU) ended as a successful faculty retreat focusing on the Internet. For the third year all University Libraries faculty from public and technical services, special collections, and the Kentucky Museum set aside one day before the beginning of the fall semester to retreat from their normal library responsibilities and environment to explore, in-depth, a single topic, and in 1993 the retreat focused on the Internet.

TEACHING THE INTERNET TO LIBRARIANS

The role of academic librarians as information professionals in using Internet resources and identifying key pathways for users is still in its infant stages. Despite warnings that one cannot teach the Internet and that people must learn it by doing, the retreat planning committee looked for ways to present complex ideas to library faculty who had varying degrees of computer expertise and diverse attitudes about computers in the workplace. The ultimate goal was to generate enthusiasm for using the Internet. Although previous retreats had featured "outside" speakers, the

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committee members felt reasonably secure in featuring themselves as leaders this year. Besides, it was a great opportunity to hone or develop Internet skills. The committee was composed of the supervisors of reference services, government services, and serials, as well as the research instruction coordinator and museum registrar/collections curator. The approach that the committee took to introduce the Internet to librarians might also be used with support staff and patrons.

A pre-workshop survey of those who planned to attend the retreat indicated that most participants had experience with online catalogs and OCLC or other online databases. Five of twenty-two respondents indicated that they were very familiar with computers, while seventeen felt somewhat familiar with computers.

One challenge in preparing for the Internet workshop was that the campus had yet to become connected directly to the Internet, connection being slated for the fall of 1993. Accounts could be obtained through the Kentucky Educational Computing Network (KECNET), allowing access to the University of Kentucky's gateway to the Internet. Consequently, each of the committee planners had to be assigned an account and a password for practicing and for developing workable exercises. In anticipation of the direct connection to Internet, the retreat committee plunged headlong into hours of meetings, individual practice sessions, and more meetings to refine the agenda; create exercises, bibliographies, and glossaries; and rehearse the presentation. The total time frame for this entire venture was four weeks.

PRELIMINARY TRAINING PLAN

The research instruction coordinator encouraged the committee to develop a logo and theme that could be used for general faculty sessions. The idea evolved for an Internet backboard and a basketball net into which went global balls with key Internet acronyms: FTP, WWW, TCP/IP, WAIS, Archie, VERONICA, and Gopher (see figure 1). As

The Net Result

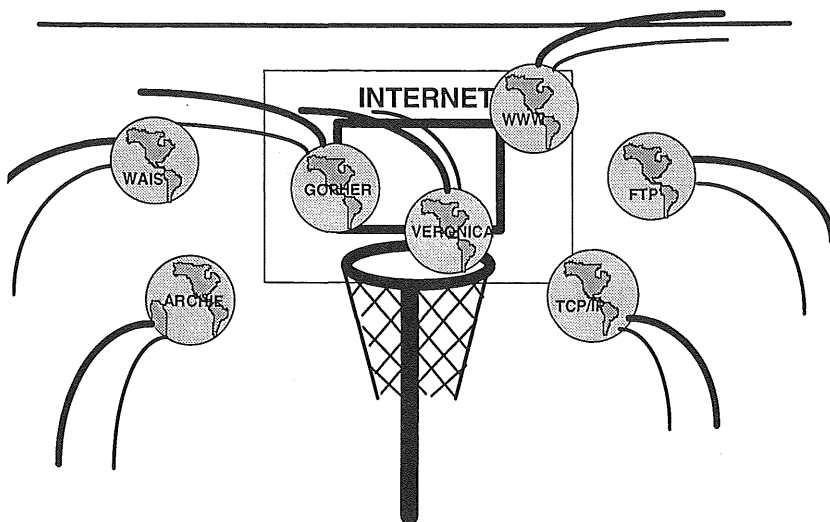*Figure 1. Workshop Logo.*

ideas evolved for presentations, so did an abundance of analogies to explain and define the intricacies of the Internet.

THE RETREAT

The retreat opened with comments from the dean of libraries, followed by an update on campus Internet progress from the associate vice-president for finance and administration. The associate vice-president indicated that a direct connection operating through the University of Kentucky in the fall semester would mean Internet access for all faculty. This update was promising news for everyone who recognized the essential role that the Internet has in today's world and today's libraries.

Classroom Presentations:
Analogy and Image

The morning session began with an introduction by the committee chair, the reference services supervisor, who piqued everyone's interest with a display of kudzu, a furry gopher, and Archie comic books in front of the lectern. She outlined the agenda, identified handouts in the folders with special reference to the evaluation form that would help determine future workshop topics and strategies,

and clearly stated what each person should be able to accomplish by the end of the day: (1) log onto the Internet; (2) use basic Internet navigational tools to find various pieces of information; (3) search other library catalogs; (4) search for book reviews; (5) search for manuscript collections; and (6) explore information sources from a variety of educational, scientific, and government databases. Participants' folders contained an agenda, a summary of the pre-workshop survey on computer expertise, handouts to accompany various presentations, a bibliography of Internet books, a special list of items on reserve in WKU's main library, a glossary, and a keyboard template for the terminals used in the afternoon hands-on session at one of the campus computing labs.

The next presenter, the government services supervisor, explained the what, how, where, and why of the Internet: what it is and does, how it evolved, where it is going, and why librarians need it. She then cited a few statistics on its phenomenal growth (like kudzu) and shared some historical background. Articles in the workshop folder supplemented this overview. A transparency of an eighteenth-century Kentucky road map

compared with one published in 1993 illustrated the complexity of travel and the need for using current guides to plan for driving trips, a perfect analogy for navigating the Internet.

An explanation of the Internet address system (the Domain Name System) followed. The serials supervisor noted in similar fashion the pitfalls a traveler would face if a local travel agent designed a route by using a 1970 road map for a trip and prepared the total itinerary in one bulky document instead of a flip-chart format featuring small segments that eventually carry the traveler to the destination of choice. She also highlighted the importance of how information travels across the Internet, the basic pieces of an Internet address, and how a user can recognize from what domain the information comes.

Throughout the morning session the speakers relied on many forms of audiovisuals: a chalkboard, transparencies, slides, and an actual log-on demo using a laptop computer and a projection display panel. Equally important was the intent to keep all discussions and explanations as free of acronyms as possible. When an acronym was used, the speaker was required to explain it. Keeping everything simple and presenting concepts slowly and carefully while holding everyone's attention were fundamental goals of the retreat committee.

The committee had decided early in its planning not to introduce downloading files to local workstations or to dwell on WAIS or the World-Wide Web. Those topics could wait for other workshops. Also, since electronic mail and discussion groups had been discussed the previous year, the focus this year was strictly on accessing information on the Internet. To succeed with this objective, the museum registrar, a bona fide Internet novice, assumed the most difficult and longest part of the presentation. Her ability to understand concepts and then explain them to the audience was a key motivational element.

Her presentation unfolded the mysteries of remote log-in, file transfer protocol, Gopher, VERONICA, and Archie. The comparison of basic Internet navigational tools to those required by a handy person who uses different tools to install carpet, fix plumbing, or wire a house helped participants understand what happens when a user initiates a search. A by-product of this segment was

proof that lack of Internet experience was not a barrier to exploring the information universe.

A break after the last formal presentation allowed the workshop leaders to set up the equipment for subsequent online demonstrations through KECNET. Speakers gave demonstrations that used the navigational tools of the Internet and illustrated possible uses of the Internet in the daily work environment. Book reviews, library catalogs, manuscript collections, and other sources would become integral parts of exercises for the afternoon hands-on session in the computing lab. A slide summary, narrated by the research instruction coordinator, served as a wrap-up of what had been covered in the past three hours.

Hands-On Session

The afternoon hands-on session took place in a computing lab in order to give participants a chance to explore the Internet firsthand. In retrospect, with the knowledge that seventeen participants and five committee members had to share seven computers, the committee should have split the afternoon into two practice sessions. Due to the shortage of workstations, participants had to wait for a chance to work through exercises. Some returned to practice further when computers became available, and everyone remained congenial and patient. The committee members' reward came in watching people practice, succeed, come back for more, invent their own searches, and succeed again.

Feedback

The evaluations turned in after the retreat reflected seventeen responses (100 percent). The very positive assessments of the workshop actually overwhelmed the committee. Thirteen rated the workshop as excellent overall; four as good. Twelve people agreed that additional workshops were necessary. Comments ranged from suggestions about narrowing the focus of the exercises to more library catalogs to a definite plea for continuous updating of a "vigorously growing system."

The committee chair summarized these evaluation results and sent them to all library faculty along with a list of the retreat planners who will serve as liaisons for their various constituencies. In this way all librarians have a contact and consultant when the Internet

becomes part of their daily routines. Already some librarians are spending time on personal computers, signing on via KECNET, and traveling down the Internet highway.

CONCLUSION

The committee identified four key factors as contributing to the positive response to this workshop: (1) maintaining a high level of enthusiasm during all stages of the retreat; (2) using an abundance of analogies that allowed for a ready grasp of concepts; (3) keeping acronyms at a minimum and striving for an uncomplicated path of instruction; and (4) reinforcing the examples and comments of the other presenters to give a thread of unity to the agenda. These factors brought about a real change in attitude toward computer use and hardware barriers. Before the workshop began, one participant commented,

"This better be good." No doubt the committee members felt that they had achieved the net result when this same person later complimented the committee for its program and expressed interest in the potential of the Internet.

Whether a person chooses to travel, surf, navigate, or explore cyberspace, the basic tools of Internet access can be used with a minimum of frustration. Last year's theme of the American Library Association challenged librarians to empower people by providing access to information. A librarian's ease and expertise with Internet tools and enthusiasm for Internet resources are essential parts of that empowerment. Analogy, image, creativity, and colleagues' support can create a climate conducive to successful Internet training. ■ ■