

# **Creating Learning Moments in the Web-enhanced Classroom**

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that creative use of internet teaching modules can enhance traditional classroom teaching by creating ‘learning moments’ for students. Drawing on a parallel example of how entertainment industries may create memorable moments for consumers, this article suggests that manipulation of social relationships, academic substance, and physical environment create moments. Such learning moments can be generated with internet technology and can be used effectively for teaching students real-life concerns about social phenomena. An example of this kind of creative pedagogy is described, along with student feedback on early versions of this teaching tool.

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There are few experiences more disheartening than looking out across a sea of sleepy faces, some red-eyed from a late night or a recent love lost, others furtively reading hidden student newspapers, and still others staring blankly while mindlessly copying everything that is written on the chalkboard. There are few experiences more exhilarating than the unexpected arrival of that most elusive (dare I say blessed?) of events -- the teaching moment, when students sit up and focus, when an unanticipated issue resonates with student and teacher. These are the moments when students become personally engaged, when their curiosity is piqued, and when their emotions (not simply their random access memory) are triggered. From students' point of view, these are not "teaching moments," but "learning moments."

The teaching/learning moment is an emergent experience springing from an alchemy of social relationships, academic substance, and physical environment. But is it necessary for students to be in a classroom to experience a learning moment of the kind I have described? If so, then the rapidly expanding phenomenon of distance education will provide a consistently poor substitute for the occasionally brilliant classroom experience. But, if learning moments are possible while a student is sitting alone in a room, working on the content of a distance-delivery course, then new possibilities emerge for effectively using the web to teach distance education students and to enhance normal classroom teaching.

This paper argues that, if done right, creative use of distance education technology can make students sit up at their desks in the privacy of their rooms and attend to course material in a new way, whether they are then expected to attend class in a live-chat room on the web, or in a live classroom on campus. To make this argument I describe a teaching project which demonstrates how a creatively designed internet module can repeatedly provide "moments" that make an impression on students and that draw them actively into the course. I also report student feedback and comments that illustrate "learning moments." This paper does not suggest that internet teaching is always more effective than classroom teaching, but instead suggests that using the web in on-campus teaching is more than a novelty, or a necessary kowtow to the administration or student preferences. It offers new possibilities for inspiring students on campus and online.

## **Main Street, USA - 2000**

The Disney corporation knows how to repeatedly, effectively, create “moments” of enchantment (Ritzer 1999). In November 2000 at the Disneyland theme park thousands of guests stood on Main Street at sundown, watching fireworks over Sleeping Beauty’s castle. Explosions were perfectly synchronized with contemporary and classical music urging the crowd to “believe in holiday magic.” The show climaxed with synthetic snow blown from the surrounding rooftops, floating down on the crowd, creating a Dickens-type wintry scene in spite of near-tropical temperatures. As lovers embraced, tearful parents spontaneously hugged their children and each other, asking strangers to take family photos that would undoubtedly appear on photo-Christmas cards. A “moment” was created through a careful manipulation of *relationships* (family), thematic *substance* (“holiday magic”), and *physical environment* (snow, light, and music). The moment would be re-created for a new set of guests the following night.

Most classroom lectures do not create “moments”. We teachers are generally averse to manipulative tactics and we know that what enchants students one term may quickly grow stale only one academic term later (Ritzer 1999). Students quickly learn when to “expect the snow.” However, the first snow makes a memorable impression on students. And entertainment corporations’ profit-driven use of moment-creating techniques need not drive teachers off from creatively using technology, environment, and relationships to inspire their students.

My chief claim is that the internet and web-based teaching modules can be used to create learning moments for students. The primary promises of the internet have been increased dissemination of information and more efficient communication between parties. But the internet is more than access to a big library or to the professor’s notes, and more than an inexpensive medium for delivering streams of audio and video material that could otherwise be captured on videotape. The internet provides important opportunities to create interactive learning experiences for students near and far.

The use of distance education technology provides many unintended benefits for the traditional classroom (Edwards, Cordray and Dorbolo 2000). Chief among these benefits is the creation of transferable components that are designed for distance education courses and then incorporated into the on-campus class. But these components offer the promise of producing learning moments for students. In pursuing that goal the teacher must ask, “how can we use the web to accomplish what we cannot normally do in the classroom,” and “how can we use this tool

to inspire and impress students, to create a learning moment?”

### **Weber Towers, USA – 2000**

One example of an internet tool, designed to create learning moments for sociology students, is “Weber Towers”. (URL: <http://osu.orst.edu/instruct/soc426/webertowers2000.html>). Designed to be used in a social stratification distance education course, this tool creates a complex, text-rich, and visual fiction that reflects real life. *Relationships* between the students and characters of the fiction, and relationships between characters, create potential for emotional engagement. Academic *substance* is presented in such a way that inductive inquiry is called forth. And “virtually” *physical environment* is employed to engage students’ imagination.

Upon registering for the distance education course, or logging onto the Weber Towers web-site from on campus, students are alerted to the fiction that they are now employed on the janitorial staff of a 50-story skyscraper called Weber Towers. During the first week, they move through the towers via an elevator panel that takes them, in a pre-determined order, to visit four apartments. (See attached appendix for examples.) A wealthy bachelor lives in the penthouse, a single mother in the basement. A working class man and his girlfriend live just above ground floor, and a dual-career middle class family lives between them and the penthouse. Students never actually see the inhabitants but instead read pop-up texts that provide transcripts of something the inhabitants say to them or to other people. Other pop-up texts, linked to items in the apartment, explain something more about the life of the family whose apartment they are visiting.

A strength of this hyper-text approach is that students are urged to be inquisitive and inductive in trying to learn all that they can about the inhabitants and about the links between these apartment dwellers. By clicking on ‘hot’ items in the apartments, they locate clues that raise suspicions about how one family’s actions influence another family. Within any given week, students are shown how similar objects have different social meanings, by class. For example, one week students observe a hot-tub brochure on the table of each apartment. But when they click on that brochure, they find out that for the poor woman, this indicates a part-time job for her, cleaning hot tubs. For the working class man, this is a chance to moonlight, installing hot-tubs, and for the middle class family, this brochure represents a new addition to

their apartment. As a result of any given week of exploration, students learn sociological concepts such as the social meaning of objects, the sociological imagination, social networks or unintended effects of social structural change. Students learn this by inductively inquiring rather than by copying an outline from the chalkboard. This inductive inquiry is very difficult to create in the classroom. However, the opportunity to discuss this inquiry in class after students have completed it at home often leads to vigorous discussion in the classroom.

Weber Towers not only illustrates sociological concepts within any given “tour” during a given week. It also seeks to draw students into a story that will pique their emotions and reveal those things that they are passionate about. Over the academic term, students begin to see a novella, or soap opera, beginning to develop in the Towers. For example, after several weeks they discover that the poor single mother used to be married to the working class man. When the poor woman’s daughter dies of a rat-bite in the basement, we find out that the working class man has been delinquent in his child-support payment, and now comes through with enough money to at least pay for the cemetery plot. Several students have reported to me that they were “shocked”, “angry”, and “choked up” when they got to this part of the story. At another point in the story, students experience the power of the wealthy when they are told that they must first go upstairs to clean up some graffiti instead of immediately attending to a more urgent gas leak in the basement. Students have posted angry comments saying, “why can’t we go downstairs first?” or “this is sick...” (Ironically, and poetically, the computer will not let them go to help the poor woman until they go upstairs first.) Still other students have asked when they can go on to the next tour because they want to know what will happen to these families. No student has ever asked me to divulge the material of the next exam, and as far as I know, no student has ever been choked up by the material in one of my lectures. But using this internet fiction creatively has generated learning moments when students have immediately written, “this makes me realize how much privilege I actually have as a middle class person,” or “this guy offends the hell out of me because I’m working class and my life is not like this.”

Weber Towers also provides students opportunities to engage in research projects that draw upon the near-fictions of the course. Three examples illustrate these possibilities. First, to give students a chance to try archival research, the students are told that they must go up to the penthouse to collect some extra chairs, left over from the previous evening’s meeting of the residents’ council. However, they find a copy of the agenda for last night’s meeting, as well as a

copy of the minutes from the previous month's meeting. Students then engage in content analysis, looking for and writing about evidence of political power, institutionalized discrimination, and further evidence of class oppression. Some students have written impassioned critiques of the rental policies in Weber Towers, treating these near-fictions as if they deserved real attention by Housing and Urban Development. Second, students are asked at the end of the term to use a search tool that lets them compare any combination of the popup texts they have read during the course. So, a student may want to compare the texts that were linked to the television in all four apartments during the middle three weeks of the term. With this search tool, s/he can gather together the small texts about advertising and television-watching habits associated with various classes, and engage in a small qualitative analysis project. Finally, students may read a real-life document, such as the glass ceiling commission report, and compare what they read there with evidence of gender discrimination they have already observed in Weber Towers.

Offering Weber Towers to students has provided them the opportunity to develop an inductive inquisitiveness, to inspire or provoke their emotions, and to create on-line research experiences. The feedback from students suggests that many of them experience 'learning moments' as they work with this tool. And the fact that students in successive offerings of the class indicate similar reactions suggests that, like Main Street Christmas snow, several parts of this class repeatedly create memorable teaching moments. Whether or not there are more learning moments accomplished than in a typical series of lectures is not easy to validate. But to the extent that student feedback can be trusted, there are many more occasions where students have reported in the classroom or online that these interactive fictions on the internet have unsettled, challenged, angered, and appalled them in important ways that have led to memorable learning.

### **Behind the Scenes: Snow Machines and Data Bases**

The fake snow on Disney's Main Street is no technological marvel. It is simply soap suds blown out of a series of machines. Weber Towers is no technological marvel either. There is no animation – simply still life water-color pictures. The popup windows are delivered with java language, but they could just as easily have been included as simple .html popup windows. The pages are delivered by a data base (MySQL), but they could just as easily be used with a

standard server. There is no streaming video or audio. However, just like the simplicity of soap suds by moonlight, a simple telling of a story with still-life pictures creates room for learning moments. And, unfettered by extreme technological complexity, the instructor may instead attend to pedagogical creativity.

The dominant value which guided creation of Weber Towers was “creative pedagogy over technology.” What Weber Towers lacks in ground-breaking technological sophistication is made up for in pedagogical complexity and innovation. Current developments in distance education tend to emphasize either standardization of courses through course-ware packages sold to universities, or technological prowess, best evidenced by efforts to accelerate audio/visual streaming. Both of these general developments do not bode well for creation of internet modules such as I have described. Course-ware primarily offers efficient delivery of text to students, and this is especially attractive to instructors who do not have the time, interest, money, or training to develop more creative delivery of course substance. (It is also attractive to universities seeking to inexpensively create online university offerings.) Meanwhile, acceleration of ‘through-put’ mostly promises to reproduce television or videotape presentation – a form of distance education delivery that has already existed for at least a decade.

This project was completed by a team which included a sociology professor, an instructional design expert, a computer programmer, and an artist. The major investment was time. This project took 18 months of sporadic work to develop, however, a concentrated period of a month or two of work could have more efficiently produced this item.

## **Conclusion**

Privatizing teaching/learning moments is not the goal of my advocating creative use of new internet technology. But, assuming the inevitability of at least short-term growth distance education, and the obvious penetration of the internet into all kinds of social relationships, it makes sense to find ways to harness the pedagogical possibilities of the internet to create student-learning moments. The web-enhanced classroom, therefore, may not be one with internet-jacks for every student, but instead, one where students come back to discuss what they learned and experienced at home the previous evening while completing their homework in Weber Towers (or in some other interactive experience.) And for those students whose

classroom remains on the internet in the form of bulletin boards and chat rooms, they are not precluded from the occasional magic of the classroom teaching/learning moment.

Use of social relationships, substance, and environment in creating moments is a sociologically informed approach to effective pedagogy both online and in the classroom. Such use of these components for creating memorable moments on Main Street need not be left to the entertainment industry. We may successfully draw upon students' expectation for such moments and provide less sentimental, trivial moments than fake snow in an Anaheim November. We may effectively engage students in visual fictions that activate their sociological imagination for understanding real life social concerns.

### **References**

Ritzer, George. 1999. Reenchanting a Disenchanted World: Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption. Pine Forge Press.

Edwards, Mark Evan, Sheila Cordray, and Jon Dorbolo. 2000. "Unintended Benefits of Distance-Education Technology for Traditional Classroom Teaching." Teaching Sociology 28:386-391.

### **Note**

Weber Towers continues to be used in an on-campus and a distance education course. It may be seen directly by going to the following web-site:

URL: <http://osu.orst.edu/instruct/soc426/webertowers2000.html>

## Appendix

### Penthouse:

Home of Peter Powers, former .com millionaire, who wisely sold his business and got into property development. Heads the Weber Towers Residents Council and currently is working on a pool and water-park complex in the middle floors of the Towers.

### Middle class floors:

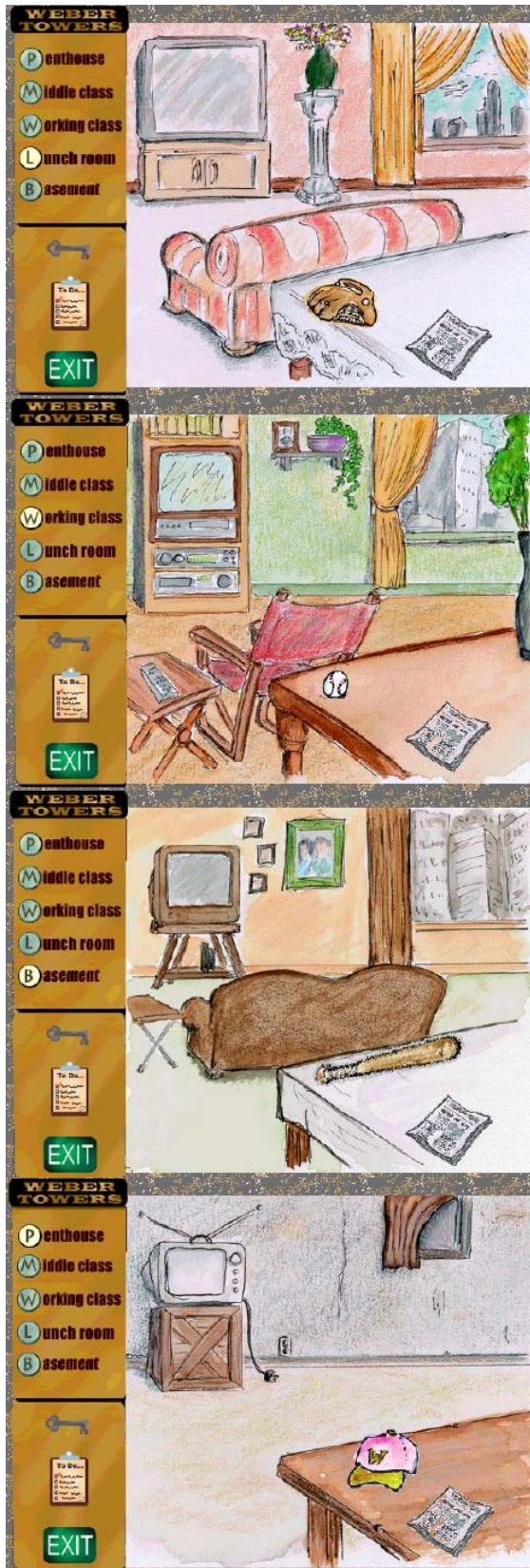
Home of Bill and Melissa Penn, a HMO doctor and a social worker, respectively. With mild sedatives she copes with the shock of an unexpectedly pregnant teenager. This, plus the changes in his profession, push Bill into a mild depression.

### Working class floors:

Joe Alvarez, a sheet metal worker, lives with his girlfriend Molly, a widow with a couple young kids. She works evenings as a school janitor. He doesn't support his former wife and children, but saves money to help support Molly's kids. Rising rent forces them to move.

### Basement:

Loretta lives alone with her kids after Joe left her for Molly. She runs the salad bar at a local restaurant. Loretta faces at least one eviction and the serious illness of her youngest daughter. When the pool project goes bad, she, unfortunately, lives beneath it.



At \$110,000 per season, the corporate skybox was probably overkill but much of it could be written off as a business expense. Not much chance of catching a foul ball up there though.

The funny thing is, Durkheist almost never uses it, and the box sits empty for almost a third of the home games.

Along with two other docs in the office, Bill has season tickets. Now that they have bought these for several years running, they get to sit right down close, behind the 3rd base dugout. When he was a kid, Bill used to pay a couple bucks to sit out in the left field bleachers. But now the cheap seats are generally filled by drunks, undesirables and college students.

This bat has some sentimental value that he's never explained to Molly, but he claims to keep it in the house to scare off punk kids. He still attends games sometimes, but the bleacher seats that used to be \$5 are now almost \$20.

When Loretta was married to Joe, they would go to the ballgame sometimes. (Her cousin Juan played AAA ball in the southern league.) Sometimes she can catch the game on the radio at work before opening but she has neither the time nor money to attend any games herself.