Soaring into the Future: The Purdue OWL and Supporting the Next Generation of Writers

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Tammy Conard-Salvo, Caitlan Spronk, and Joshua M. Paiz
BACKGROUND & IMPACT OF THE OWL
Birth of the Purdue OWL

- Began in 1993 as a pre-web internet technology using ASCII and gopher.
- Handouts were numbered and corresponded to a filing cabinet full of hard copies.
- Became a website in 1994.
Some Statistics

- In 1993, the pre-web OWL received 5,350 requests for handouts from 587 users.
- In 2013, received more than 248 million hits from more than 125 countries.
- The site now contains more than 300 resources, including PPTs, podcasts, and a YouTube channel.
Different Stakeholders

- Undergraduate and graduate students
- K-12 students
- Teachers in K-12 and higher education
- Parents
- Corporate trainers
- English language learners
- General public
• Fulfills Purdue’s Land Grant Mission as defined by the Morrill Act:
  – Practical education relevant to daily lives for broad segment of population (APLU, 1)
  – Extension activities for socially and economically disadvantaged (APLU, 1)
• Serves as a gateway to the university.
Affect on WC Technology

- Documents (possibly) the first use of “online writing lab.”
- Demonstrates outreach possibilities for WCs.
- Shows positive use of technology in WCs, created by WCs for WCs.
- Allows other WCs to link to Purdue and focus on customized handouts and services.
• Usability research: user-centered and participatory design for site navigability and accessibility
• Engagement-related research: partnering with community organizations to meet needs
• Separate, linked research repository: housing scholarly, archival, and administrative documents through a collaboration with Libraries
PRESENT & FUTURE RESEARCH & CONTENT
New Research Initiatives

• Usability research and L2 writers: We hope to incorporate *linguistic accessibility* research into future usability studies.

• OWLs and the EFL Context: A multi-year research project in a number of parts.
  – Part 1: The *An OWL Abroad Research* project
  – Part 2: The *Best Practices* project
  – Part 3 (tentative): EFL usability & accessibility testing
An OWL Abroad

• Major findings:
  – OWL usage – Purdue and Other
  – Appropriateness of OWL resources
  – What practitioners want

• Implications for the Purdue OWL:
  – Static content development partnerships
  – Launching of an L2 writing vidcast series
  – L2 writers as content developers

• Implications for OWLs in general:
  – Major growth area for both research and development
  – Encouraging local OWLs to “hatch”
  – Research on best practices and user experience/attitudes
OWL Research Next Steps

- **Best Practices project**
  - What goes into making robust SLW resources?
  - What are best practices that might inform and encourage local EFL OWLs to hatch?

- **EFL usability & accessibility testing (tentative)**
  - Intercultural Rhetoric paradigm
  - Internet-based prototyping
  - Internet-based linguistic accessibility research
  - Possible international partners: *Shandong Daxue*, *Tōkyō Daigaku*, and the *Uniwersytet Łódzki*
Content Partnerships

• Graphic and video design:
  – Anniversary logo
  – YouTube channel trailer

• L2 writing content:
  – MLA and APA “quick guides”
  – MLA and APA vidcasts for L2 writers
  – TOEFL writing
  – Additional genre-based resources
TECHNOLOGY CHALLENGES & GOALS
Technology Challenges

- Dealing with increased demand on the server
- Accounting for greater diversity of user technology
- Incorporating increasingly sophisticated new web technologies to remain relevant
- Meeting increased user expectations
- Balancing accessibility, usability, and interactivity
Server Demands

- Number of resources and visits grows every year
- More visits and resources = more server traffic
- More visibility = greater potential for attack/misuse
Diversity of User Technology

- Varying Internet speeds
- Wildly different screen sizes and resolutions
- Different web browsers
- Adaptive technology
- Different contexts of use
Sophisticated Technologies

1. When the OWL started, it was written purely in HTML.
2. It now uses HTML, CSS, PHP, MySQL, and JavaScript.
3. To remain relevant, we may have to consider HTML5, CSS3, PHP 5.2.8+, Ajax, Ruby on Rails, JSON, etc.
4. Requires more time and knowledge on the part of the webmaster and places greater demands on the server.
Increased User Expectations

• “The 90s called, it wants its website back.”
• Many users expect interactive, responsive sites that look current.
• However, other users don’t have the technology capabilities needed for bleeding edge web design.
• Many users expect interactivity (e.g. emails regarding interactivity of exercises).
• Fancy javascript, etc. interactivity doesn’t always play nice with accessibility.
• Need to find a way to balance these: sometimes they work together.
Technology Goals

• Make the site more friendly to multiple screen sizes and resolutions
• Improve navigation and information architecture (usability testing & site redesign)
• Add graceful usability and interactivity enhancements (e.g. Ajax form validation)
• Refactor back end code to make updating the OWL a quicker process and to enhance security
• Add interactive elements, such as video