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Putting Materials on the Web: A Primer for Editors
Felicia Johnson

Creating a web site begins with the collection of resources, either primary or secondary or a combination of the two. Before resources can be identified as valuable and pertinent to continued scholarly research in a specific area and made available on the web, several different kinds of people invested in the project meet to discuss goals and objectives. First, everyone in the group acknowledges the relevance and importance of the resources and agrees that making the resources more accessible on the web will enhance research in that area. Then, the group takes on the task of getting the materials on the web. Unfortunately, quite frequently those charged with putting sources on the web are not best qualified to do so. A common error in this situation is to rush forward without a plan. It is important to realize that putting resources on the web is only one step in the multi-step process of web site development. Web site development begins before a single resource reaches a scanner or the first generation of digital surrogate is produced. A successful web site begins with developing a comprehensive plan.

No single individual should be responsible for the development of an organization’s or project’s web site. Successful web sites are built by a team of people who are invested in the project. The site’s effectiveness is dependent upon the ability of the team to establish the site’s goals and mission. Though varying by the size of an organization, a development team typically consists of a combination of the following individuals: content experts, writers, programmers, database developers, graphic designers, information architects, budget managers and a project manager. A small organization may need to outsource aspects of site development. In that case, the organization must assign people to coordinate with the off-site experts to ensure that the organizational mission and goals remain intact. Ideally, it is the responsibility of the development team to identify the site’s goals and mission. The team members must agree on the answers to difficult but important questions. What is the goal? Does the goal support the mission of the organization? In addition, the development team must remember that web
sites are dynamic, and that they rarely reach a final stage of completeness. All web sites require maintenance, updates, and support. The objectives for a successful web site are two-fold: In the short-term to provide immediate access to the content and in the long-term foremost sustainability of the site. Much of a web site's success depends on knowing the audience.

Key questions: For whom is the site created? Who will most likely use it? Will the site attract expert researchers or beginning students? Efforts to identify potential users correctly will influence the site's design. An effective web site is designed to meet the needs of the users. Design efforts should be tailored to meet its users' expectations, providing accessibility to the content through well-organized navigation. A properly planned site reflects its users' technical skills and knowledge. Familiarity with the audiences reduces the use of unfamiliar vocabulary or difficult technical jargon. The objective is to provide the users with the content, efficiently.

Web development for educators by educators has a unique advantage in that these web designers are keenly aware and knowledgeable about their audience. Identifying the needs of potential users is less complicated if users and developers share the same expectations. Educators as developers can establish credibility on their sites by use of a common understood vocabulary. Sites for educators should emphasize accessibility and validity, without much sifting. In addition, keeping information current is essential on any site. Educators are known to like certain features of web sites:

- Tips, tricks, and ideas for lessons are useful to educators when they create their own lesson plans.
- A place where teachers, researchers, and students can offer their own ideas or plans.
- Create an area for feedback with the site's developers.
- A place to recognize return users and create subscription lists to contact users when updates are added to the site.
- Access to the all materials while continuing to update resources and add new ones.
- Links to other resources in support of materials available on your site.

Once the users' needs and expectations have been established, the next step in the process of web site development focuses on the materials. An assessment of the entire collection is essential. Organizations may choose to catalog large collections or to create databases that provide access to the resources. Either technique will serve to demonstrate the scope of the mate-
rialss as well as indicate elements that are missing. A thorough understanding of the content in all of its complexities is critical in enabling the development team to guide the site designers towards an appropriate and attractive design.

With questions concerning content settled, the site designers can focus on the key areas of the collection identified by the development team. On the site, key areas are likely to become headers or entry points to the collection. Web design is multi-functional. The first objective of web design is to create a visually appealing site; the second purpose is to ensure that visual attractiveness is well coordinated with clear organization and easy accessibility of all of the materials and web site components.

Additional steps in web site construction may not involve the entire team. Typically, the development process includes six steps:  

1. site definition and planning
2. information architecture
3. site design
4. site construction
5. site marketing
6. tracking, evaluation, and maintenance

Each of these stages also includes aspects of production and technology, budgeting, site design specifications, and graphic design.

Web site development is complex and resource intensive but adhering to sound practices will ensure a successful and sustainable site. Putting materials on the web is an excellent way to share information, enhance research, and promote an organization or project. It can be done well and efficiently if the foundation for the web site is built correctly.
