

Interactive Learning: Vignettes from America's Most Wired Campuses

David G. Brown

Anker Publishing Company, Inc., 2000,
\$30.95 paper, 300 pages

ISBN 1-882982-29-0

Reviewed by Victoria L. Cross

A grand thing about independent experimentation is that multiple, viable practices evolve. A variety of uses emerge that no one person or situation could have produced, but there comes a time when, to continue to evolve, the practices must be brought out into the light and evaluated. The "random acts of progress" occurring on campuses all over the country are brought together in David Brown's edited collection of vignettes, *Interactive Learning*. Following the philosophy that Brown presents in his introduction, we are now in a position to compare these innovations, evaluate them, and make informed decisions on techniques that, until now, have been developing more or less in isolation. This is a major step forward and will serve as an invaluable resource for faculty looking to incorporate technology-based elements into their own class or for those who counsel faculty on the instructional applications of technology.

Don't be dissuaded by the fact that these vignettes are arranged by discipline—many of these solutions will be appropriately shared across disciplines. There are multiple indexes that allow the reader to peruse related vignettes by tools and techniques used or by educational beliefs.

The nature of our university system gives us classes with a great mixture of student backgrounds, interests, and skills. Many of the vignettes extol the power of technology for "leveling the playing field." For example, technology can allow students to move at their own pace through some preparatory materi-

al, to back up if they are unfamiliar with the vocabulary, or to move straight to the quiz if they understand the material. The history of the university has also left us with a legacy of lecture halls. Most courses are primarily taught in a single format—the professor in front of a class conducting a (mostly) one-way stream of knowledge to the students. This collection of vignettes helps us to evaluate which subjects may not be best served by this means of teaching and which stand to benefit most from the doors opened by computer-aided instruction. These vignettes form a starting place from which we can leap forward in a more coordinated effort.

Reviewer Victoria L. Cross (vlcross@ucdavis.edu) is coordinator of educational technology in the Teaching Resources Center at the University of California, Davis.

Designing for Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity

Jakob Nielsen

New Riders Publishing, 2000, \$45.00,
420 pages

ISBN 1-56205-810-X

Reviewed by Kathryn F. Gates

In academic settings, the Web can take on an outward focus, serving as a powerful recruiting tool, a kiosk for visitors, and a resource for peer institutions. It also can be used internally to create a unified interface to campus information systems, with the aim of increased convenience, productivity, and utility for the campus community. While the Web can be a tremendously effective means for delivering information and services and for enhancing the learning environment, it can also be unwieldy and overly complex for end users. As colleges and universities seek to use this new medium to reach their various constituent groups, they

are faced with the challenge of designing Web sites that have high usability.

Jakob Nielsen provides much needed guidance in his new book, *Designing for Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity*. According to Nielsen, the Darwinist nature of the online world, where only the "fittest" Web sites survive, demands that Web designers cater to the goals of their target audiences. The question, then, is how to make the most of the Web. What do users want? What causes them to return for more? How can one achieve broad accessibility, spanning various monitor sizes and resolutions and disparate connection speeds? What makes for good navigation?

Nielsen masterfully addresses these issues and more as he defines the characteristics of "usable" Web sites. He offers much needed advice on focusing on the user's goals, designing for accessibility, and improving navigational support, that is, taming the Web so that users can easily get what they need. Included among the topics covered in this text are site design, meeting the needs of users with disabilities, and designing for international audiences. Nielsen's refreshing approach and emphasis on simplicity are certain to be immediately useful to every Web designer.

This text is an excellent resource and should be considered required reading for those who endeavor to serve their clients through the Web. Nielsen helps set fundamental standards and guidelines by which Web sites can be evaluated for usability. This text is especially relevant to educators who seek to exploit the Web to enhance teaching and learning and to better serve the academic community.

Kathryn F. Gates (kfg@olemiss.edu) is the director of Academic Computing and Support Services at the University of Mississippi.