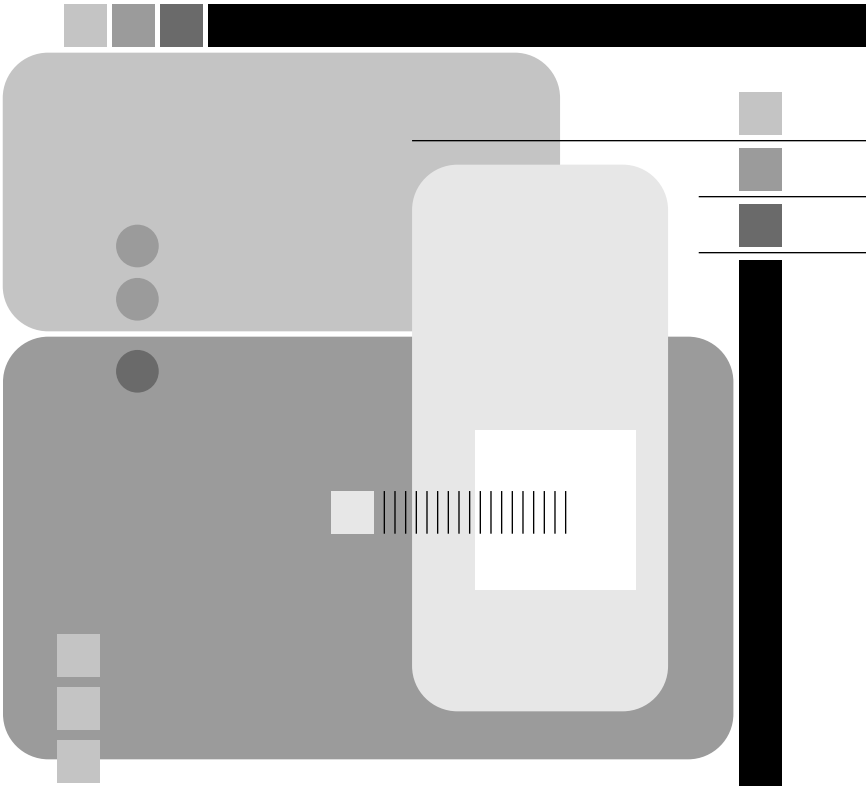




I

Getting Started





1

Teaching Online: An Overview

Because teaching online is relatively new, many people don't know what it is, or how it's done, or even what some of the terms used to describe it mean. Others may have a notion of what's involved, but they don't know how to get started, or they feel some trepidation about handling the issues they may encounter. Perhaps this is because the online environment is so different from anything most instructors have encountered before.

Teaching online means conducting a course partially or entirely through the Internet. It's a form of *distance education*, a process that includes courses taught through the mail, by videotape, or via telephone hookups or satellite TV—any form of learning that doesn't involve the traditional classroom setting in which students and instructor must be at the same place at the same time.

What makes teaching online unique is that it uses the Internet, especially the World Wide Web, as the primary means of communication. Thus, when you teach online, you don't have to *be* someplace to teach. You don't have to lug your briefcase full of papers to a classroom, stand at a lectern, scribble on a chalkboard, or grade papers in a stuffy room while your students take a test. You don't even have to sit in your office waiting for students to show up for conferences. You can hold "office hours" on weekends or at night after dinner. You can do all this while living in a small town in Wyoming, even if you're working for a college whose administrative offices are located in Florida. You can attend an important conference in Hawaii on the same day that you teach your class in New Jersey, logging on from your hotel room's telephone.

Online learning offers more freedom for students as well. They can search for courses using the Web, scouring the world for programs, classes, and instructors that fit their needs. Having found an appropriate course, they can enroll and register, shop for their books, read articles, listen to lectures, submit their homework assignments, confer with their instructors, and receive their final grades—all online. They can assemble in **virtual classrooms**, joining other students from diverse geographic locales, forging bonds and friendships not possible in conventional classrooms, which are often limited to students from a specific geographical area.

virtual classroom Any online area in which instructors and students “meet,” via their computer connections, for course activities.

The convenience of learning online applies equally well to adult learners, students from educationally underserved areas, those pursuing specialized or advanced degrees, those who want to advance in their degree work through credentialed courses, and any students who simply want to augment the curricular offerings from their local institutions. No longer must they drive to school, find a parking space, sit in a lecture hall at a specific time, wait outside their instructors’ offices for conferences, and take their final exams in a stuffy room. They can hold a job, have a family, take care of parents or pets, and even travel. As long as they can get to a computer connected to the Internet, students can, in most cases, keep up with their work even if they’re busy during the day. School is always in session because school is always there.

So dynamic is the Web that new technologies and techniques are emerging all the time. What’s commonplace one year becomes old hat the next. The only thing that seems to remain constant is people’s desire to send and receive information efficiently, no matter what the means. That’s what drives people to shop, invest, and converse online, and it is this same force that is propelling them to learn online as well.

But all this freedom and innovation can sometimes be perplexing. If the conventional tools of teaching have been removed, how *do* you teach? If school’s open twenty-four hours

a day, seven days a week, when is school out? What is the role of the instructor if you don't see your students face to face? Do you become simply a lecturer, or are you more like a facilitator? moderator? or colleague?

And what if you're among the many instructors who teach face to face but maintain a web site as well? Does making your course notes available online mean that coming to class will become obsolete? How do you balance the real and virtual worlds so that they work together? And if information can be presented readily online, what should class time be devoted to: discussions? student presentations? structured debates?

There is no prototypical experience of teaching online. Some instructors use the Web as an adjunct to what they teach in class. Others teach entirely on the Web. Some institutions have sophisticated hardware and software that they make available; others offer little more than the bare bones.

You will get a sense of these differences in the chapters that follow. For the time being, take a look at two hypothetical instructors working online.

The Range of Online Experiences: Two Hypothetical Cases

The first of our hypothetical instructors, Jim Hegelmarks, teaches philosophy entirely online. The second, Miriam Sharpe, teaches a first-year physics course in a conventional classroom but uses a web site to help her students review material and get answers for their questions. If some of the terms we use seem unfamiliar to you, have a look at the box "Some Terms of the Trade."

Western Philosophy, a Course Taught Entirely Online

Jim Hegelmarks's course in Western philosophy is now in its third week, and the assignment for his class is to read a short commentary he has written on John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*, portions of which the class has studied. He has asked the students to read his commentary and then

Some Terms of the Trade

web site The “place” on the World Wide Web where online teaching and learning generally take place. A web site might consist of a page or pages of information you’ve put together yourself and made available on your local Internet service provider (ISP), such as EarthLink or America Online (AOL). Or it might take the form of an **electronic bulletin board** where you and your students can exchange comments and ideas. Or it might involve a full-scale **course management system (CMS)** containing a bundle of instructional tools such as a whiteboard, bulletin board, gradebook, and means to **chat** online.

In any case, the web site resides at a computer somewhere, usually at a college, but sometimes at a commercial hosting site. It typically includes a series of pages (a “page” is equal to a screenful of information) containing text, images, and **hyperlinks** to other web pages. These pages can be written in various programming languages, such as hypertext markup language (HTML), a coded language that defines the format of onscreen text or graphics through a series of descriptive tags, and JavaScript, a program that works with HTML to make web pages interactive. There are languages that create three-dimensional worlds, as well as languages that permit you to gather information and store it in a database.

Although knowing these languages is obviously useful, it isn’t necessary to know any of them in order to be an effective online teacher, no more than it’s necessary to understand the dynamics of an internal combustion engine in order to drive a car. Fortunately, a number of WYSIWYG (“what you see is what you get”) editors, such as Netscape’s Composer and Internet Explorer’s FrontPage Express, permit you to create web pages without knowing a single tag or programming term. However, if you do want to learn more about the Web, its languages, and some of its terminology, we encourage you to visit the Learn the Net.com web site (<http://www.learnthenet.com/>) or look at some of the witty and enlightening guides and tutorials provided by Webmonkey (<http://hotwired.lycos.com/webmonkey/>).

hyperlink or link An element on a web page (typically an image, icon, or highlighted word or phrase) that makes something happen when you “click” on it with the mouse. Typically it takes you to another web page, but it can also cause a digital movie or audio file to play.

web browser A software program that permits you to view and interact with web-based material. With a browser, you can read text, view

(cont.)

digitized videos, answer surveys, participate in discussions—the list of functions is long and continues to grow each year. The two most popular browsers are Netscape Communicator (Netscape is presently owned by America Online) and Internet Explorer (created and maintained by Microsoft Corporation). These browsers are available for free download from the companies' web sites, although either or both are often provided with the purchase of a new computer.

electronic bulletin board or discussion board (also known as a forum, conference area, or threaded discussion area) A software program that permits you to “post” messages online (much as you would post a message on a cork bulletin board with a tack) and allows others to reply to your posting with one of their own. With such software, structured conversations can take place. The instructor, for example, can post an initial commentary, and students can post their replies, with all of these entries appearing in an ordered row. (This hierarchical ordering of messages is what is meant by the term *threaded*.)

With an electronic bulletin board, communication is done **asynchronously**—that is, not at the same time. Thus one student might post a query on Monday, and another student in a different time zone might reply the next day. Conferencing software comes in all kinds of structures; it may be a standalone product, or it may be contained in a course management system. To gain some idea of the range of this type of software, visit David Woolley's site called Conferencing Software for the Web (<http://thinkofit.com/webconf/>), which provides annotated lists of asynchronous conferencing programs. This is also a great resource for finding free programs.

chat online communication that occurs **synchronously**—that is, in real time. Chat software is one of the most popular tools on the Web. Typically, two or more users chat with each other by typing notes in a common message space, although newer chat software permits audio and even video communication. Chat is especially useful to instructors holding virtual conference hours or small seminars. Chat programs are available as separate programs or as part of the suite of tools in a course management system.

course management system (also known as integrated application software, online delivery system, educational delivery application, or online tool suite) A software program that contains a number of integrated instructional functions. In a course management

(cont.)

system, course materials such as lectures or graphics can be posted, discussions moderated, chat sessions invoked, and quizzes given, all within the confines of the same software system. Not only can instructors and students “manage” the flow of information, but the instructor can both assess and keep track of the performance of the students, monitoring their progress and assigning grades.

Typical examples of such software systems are those produced by WebCT, Blackboard CourseInfo, eCollege, LearningSpace, IntraLearn, Web Course in a Box, and TopClass. There are many others, some in development and others undergoing radical reform. To keep track of these systems, and compare their various features, we urge you to visit Bruce Landon’s comprehensive web site, Online Educational Delivery Applications: A Web Tool for Comparative Analysis (<http://www.ctt.bc.ca/landonline/>). These systems are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

respond in some detail to a question he has posted on the online discussion board for his course (see Figure 1.1).

Connecting to the Web from his home, Hegelmarks types the **URL** of his class web site into the location bar of his Netscape browser and is

URL Short for Uniform Resource Locator, the address for a site on the Internet. An address such as <http://www.ucla.edu/> is a URL.

promptly greeted with a log-in screen. He types in his user name (jhegelmarks) and his password (hmarks420); this process admits him to the class.

The main page of Hegelmarks’s course contains a number of navigational “buttons” he can use to manage the course. His commentary is posted in the course documents section, but the area he’s interested in today is the discussion board, so that’s where he goes first. With his mouse, he clicks on the navigational button that leads to the discussion board and reviews the messages that have been posted there. Several of the students have posted their responses to the assignment. He reads through the responses on screen thoughtfully, printing out the

Home Help Compose Forum Show All Catch Up All Update Listing Search Hide Menu	<p>Forum: All Show: Unread</p> <p>John Stuart Mill [Forum: Main]</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 6. SKShell (Mon, Jan. 3, 2000, 15:05) <small>NEW</small></p>
Select All Select None Compile Mark Read Mark Unread Move Delete Hide Menu Unthreaded Settings Forum Mgmt Reset	<p>Reply Quote Download</p> <p>[Prev Thread][Next Thread][Prev in Thread][Next in Thread]</p> <p>Message No. 6: posted by SKShell on Mon, Jan. 3, 2000, 15:05 Subject: John Stuart Mill</p> <p>Please comment on the readings about the influence of John Stuart Mill on our 19th century philosophers.</p> <p>[Prev Thread][Next Thread][Prev in Thread][Next in Thread]</p>

Figure 1.1 Jim Hegelmarks's Online Discussion Question. Jim Hegelmarks posted this question in the online discussion board, which uses WebCT software, for his philosophy course.

longer ones so that he can consider them at his leisure. Each posting is about a page in length.

After evaluating the responses, Hegelmarks gives each student a grade for this assignment and enters the grade in the online gradebook, which can be reached by clicking another navigational button on the course's main page. He knows that, when students log on to the class web site to check their grades, each student will be able to see only his or her own grades—no one else's grade will be visible. Hegelmarks also knows that those who have failed to complete this assignment will be able to monitor their progress, or lack of it, by looking at the gradebook online.

What concerns Hegelmarks now is that only five of his fifteen students have responded so far. Because it's already Friday, and there's a new assignment they must do for the next week, he decides to take a look at some of the statistical information that the course management system offers for tracking student progress. What he finds is that, of the ten students who haven't responded to the question, eight have read his commentary, some for more than sixty minutes at a time. Two haven't yet looked at it at all.

Hegelmarks's first concern is with the two students who haven't even looked at the assigned reading. It isn't the first time they've failed to complete an assignment on time. Hegelmarks sends both of them a low-key but concerned e-mail asking whether they're having any special problems he should know about, gently reminding them that they've fallen behind.

The lengthy time the other students have been taking to read his commentary concerns him as well. From past experience he knows that students often struggle with some of the concepts in Mill's *Political Economy*. He had written the commentary and created the homework assignment in an attempt to clarify the subject, but taking a second look, he now realizes that the commentary was written far too densely. He makes a note to rewrite it the next time he teaches the class.

The last task Hegelmarks completes before logging off is to comment on the student responses that he has just read and graded. He doesn't comment on each one—that would take far too long—but he composes a summary message touching on

the main points his students have made, and he posts this on the discussion board for all to see.

Introduction to Physics, a “Hybrid” Course

Our second instructor, Miriam Sharpe, teaches an introductory physics class at a large public university. Her course, a prerequisite for anyone majoring in physics, is what we call a “hybrid,” combining both online and face-to-face activities.

The class is large, with eighty students enrolled, and Sharpe has two teaching assistants to help her. Three times a week, she lectures to her class, using PowerPoint slides projected onto a screen to elucidate her points. Because she relies on so many slides, she has decided to post them on the course web site for students to review. Figure 1.2 shows an example.

Although some of her colleagues disapprove of this practice, arguing that it will dissuade students from coming to class, Sharpe contends that relieving students of the tedium of taking copious notes during her lectures makes it easier for them to comprehend and remember the material. More importantly, by posting her slides online, she gives students the opportunity to review the material before coming to class. As a result, she has found that the questions raised in class, and the discussions they evoke, are far more relevant and lively.

Sharpe also uses the web site for discussion groups. Each TA leads a discussion group of thirty students, with Sharpe handling the remaining twenty herself. In these virtual discussion groups, students can post their queries and concerns and receive a response from Sharpe, from a TA, or from one or more other students. Sharpe and her TAs make a point of checking the discussion boards at least once a day.

Sharpe has one more major use for the web site: to post sample exams. When she first started using the site, she simply posted the exams as documents that her students could read. But after her university installed a new course management system, she was able to offer the sample exams in such a way that students could take an exam online and receive both feedback and a grade. This trial assessment, she has discovered, is quite popular with her students.

Experiments with Pressure

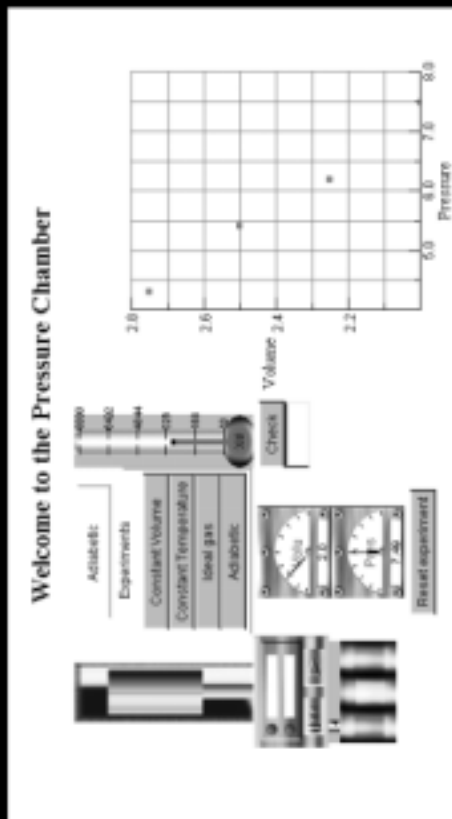


Figure 1.2 PowerPoint Slide Used by Miriam Sharpe in Her Physics Class. This type of graphic can readily be posted on a web page for students to review.

Teaching Online: The Basics

Now that you have some idea of what it's like to teach online, and what some of the basic terms and concepts are, you may be thinking about how to teach your own class online. Later chapters will go into detail on many specific aspects of the task. Here we want to comment on some of the basic pedagogical considerations involved in teaching courses like those of our two fictional instructors, Jim Hegelmarks and Miriam Sharpe.

Teaching a Course Entirely Online

Perhaps the most daunting task is to plan a new course that will be taught entirely online, particularly if you've never taught online before. Composing the syllabus, assembling the exercises and quizzes, weighing the criteria for grades—all this presents a set of unfamiliar challenges.

Yet closer inspection reveals that the approach to solving such problems is similar to what you would use “on the ground.” The same instructional strategy you've learned for a live classroom—setting the goals of the course, describing specific objectives, defining the required tasks, creating relevant assignments—applies online. Similarly, if you're converting an already-existing course into an online version, your basic approach need not change.

Where the online course differs is in technique. In a classroom, you have your physical presence—your voice, body language, intonation, expressions, gestures—to help you communicate with your students. Online, at least for the time being,* you don't. In a classroom, a smile can be a powerful signal of approval. Online, it's reduced to a ludicrous little emoticon :)—characters that look like a person grinning. In a classroom, the instructor is often the sage on the stage. Online, the instructor is more like the sage on the page. It is the written word, at least for now, that conveys the crux of what you want to say.

*As this book is being written, new tools are evolving that may radically alter the way instruction is delivered online. These are synchronous learning tools that permit instructors to “speak” to their students much as they always have. Such tools, and their implications, are dealt with in more detail in Chapter 14.

This fact puts an inordinate emphasis on style, attitude, and intonation as they are expressed in print. A sarcastic aside, a seemingly innocent joke, shorn of an apologetic smile or a moderating laugh, can seem cold and hostile to the student reading it on the screen. None of the conventional ways of modifying ambiguous or ironic statements—the wink, the raised eyebrow, the shrug, and the smile—are available online. Thus an instructor must pay particular attention to nuances.

In a physical classroom, moreover, you're always there to listen to your students or observe their interactions. Online, you're there only sporadically, at the times when you log on, whereas your students may post their comments at any time of day. These circumstances modify the instructional role you play, making you more a facilitator or moderator than the expert from whom all knowledge flows. Indeed, online courses depend heavily on the participation of students. As an instructor, you need to step back a bit from the spotlight in order to allow the students to take a more active part. Perhaps you will intervene only when the flow of conversation strays too far off the mark or when you need to summarize the conversation in order to move it along to another point.

Conversely, online participation is just as important to the student as it is to you. What makes the Web such an attractive medium—the ability to communicate instantly with anyone in the world—is what drives students to the Internet rather than to a conventional classroom. If, when they log onto the course, all they can do is read the voluminous course notes you have posted there, they will soon become frustrated and drift away.

It's your responsibility to bear all this in mind when devising your course. You will fashion tasks and exercises that emphasize student collaboration and deemphasize the traditional role of the instructor as the central figure in the pedagogical play.

This doesn't mean that an online syllabus should include only tasks that must be performed online: hunting for online material, for example, or linking to a host of other web sites. In fact, such tasks can often prove counterproductive, requiring as they do that students stay online an inordinate amount of time. Indeed, the sort of tasks you have your students perform need not, and perhaps should not, differ from what you would have

them do on the ground. They may still need to go to libraries to perform the functions of sound research (unless their institution provides database and full-text resources online), and they still need to investigate, examine, and observe phenomena on their own. What's different is how they communicate what they have learned, how they talk to each other, and how you talk to them. A successful online course often includes challenging assignments that lead to publicly conducted discussions, moderated and guided by you.

Teaching a Hybrid Course

For instructors like Miriam Sharpe, who teach face to face but use the Web to augment the work in class, there's a somewhat different set of criteria. For these instructors, the Web may be a place to post information before class, in order to inspire a meaningful in-class discussion. Or the information on the Web may help give students the proper context for a lecture, so that the lecture falls on well-informed ears rather than becoming a mere oration accompanied by the sound of pencils furiously scribbling notes.

Conversely, the web site might be used to elucidate or elaborate a point that was brought up in class. It may become a place where students can comment, critique, or analyze material in a leisurely and thoughtful way, instead of having to contend with other students in impassioned face-to-face debates. Indeed, the Web provides a safe environment for those students who ordinarily might not chime in, too timid or shy to take part in discussions with those who are louder, more aggressive, or domineering. In this sense, using the Web as a means of communication can often provoke more thoughtful and reasoned discussions than might be possible in a classroom.

Later chapters will describe the options in more detail. Here, our point is straightforward:

Important! *There's no need to start from scratch to teach online. You can apply what you already know and add to it by using new tools and techniques adapted for the online environment.*

What About Support Personnel and Training?

It may have occurred to you that mastering new courseware and techniques is a task that ought to be handled by someone else—by computer support personnel, for example, or by graduate student assistants. On many campuses, however, neither the expertise nor the funds are available to provide the support each faculty member might like to have.

Most of the time, computer support personnel have to deal with problems concerning infrastructure, networks, and servers that shut down. When they respond to an individual faculty member, they're typically concerned with hardware or software problems: "I can't type the letter *k* on my keyboard"; "The cursor just dropped off my screen!" Teaching assistants, for their part, won't necessarily have more advanced skills than faculty members, and are more appropriately concerned with pursuing their degrees.

Some online programs do offer ongoing support to their teachers: the DIAL program at the New School and OnlineLearning.net, which handles online courses for UCLA Extension, are two examples. But even in these comparatively proactive programs, there's a limit to how much attention and help can be offered to each faculty member, particularly as the number of online courses continues to grow. Of course, instructors who aren't based on a campus have even fewer resources to help them troubleshoot problems.

Equally rare is the availability of reliable and effective training for online instructors. The vast majority must learn on the job. Often this means that the first course you teach is beset with errors, miscues, and miscalculations, much as may have happened when you taught your first class face to face.

Even for those who enroll in a formal training course, the results can be disappointing. Some schools of education, staffed as they are by professors who earned their degrees twenty years ago, aren't coping well with the exigencies of online instruction. Some tend to deal with the subject as if it were a phenomenon

to be researched rather than a new set of skills to be mastered and employed. To make matters worse, training is often offered in a conventional classroom setting, depriving faculty members of the experience of learning online.

The situation isn't entirely bleak, however. There are some reliable training programs, several of which are mentioned in Chapter 13. In addition, the amount of technical know-how you need before you begin is less than you may suppose. Newcomers to online teaching are apt to exaggerate the computer expertise required. Let's address that question directly.

Do You Have to Be a Computer Expert?

Instructors often wonder what qualifications—especially what level of technical computer skills—they need to consider teaching online. Do you have to be an expert or an advanced computer user?

In terms of technical computer skills, an instructor needs little to start with. A very basic familiarity with computers and the Internet will more than suffice. That means knowing how to do the following:

1. Set up folders and directories on a hard drive.
2. Use word processing software properly (for instance, cut, copy, and paste; minimize and maximize Windows; save files).
3. Handle e-mail communications, including attachments.
4. Use a browser to access the World Wide Web.

If you lack some of these skills, you can pick them up in on-campus or online workshops. Once you're comfortable with these basic skills, you should, with experience, be able to build on them and become more skilled.

Faculty of all ranks who are enthusiastic about the possibilities offered by online teaching—and who are willing to invest some time in learning new technology and methods for the sake of personal and professional growth—are good candidates for teaching online.

Important! “Techies” don’t necessarily make the best online instructors. An interest in pedagogy should come first, technology second.

The Aim of This Book

In this book we will guide you through the world of online learning, introduce you to its tools and techniques, and help you evaluate whether teaching this way is the right choice for you. This book is a practical guide, not a pedagogical treatise. It will lead you through a fact-finding mission at the institution where you teach, show you how to convert your face-to-face course into one that you can teach online, and explore the different teaching environments available online. It will also help you reshape your syllabus and devise online exercises, manage both your class and your time, learn how to use some of the more popular software tools, and keep your career going by enabling you to stay on top of new developments.

In the next chapter, we will begin preparing you for online teaching by showing you how to explore your institution’s resources and make practical sense of what you find.

Resources

Fundamentals of the Web and Distance Learning

Distance Education Clearinghouse. <http://www.uwex.edu/disted/definition.html>

Offers definitions of distance learning and links to other distance education resources.

Learn the Net.com. <http://www.learnthenet.com/>

A good site for learning the basics of web navigation, how to download files, and much more.

Webmonkey. <http://hotwired.lycos.com/webmonkey/>

Offers a “How-to Library” with sections on authoring of web

material, design, multimedia, and more, as well as feature articles and reference guides.

Web Conferencing

Conferencing Software for the Web. <http://thinkofit.com/webconf/>

David Woolley's annotated lists of conferencing software, including both free and commercial varieties.

Online Educational Delivery Applications: A Web Tool for Comparative Analysis. <http://www.ctt.bc.ca/landonline/>

Bruce Landon's site designed "to help educators evaluate and select online delivery software."