



# Lies, Deception and Heroification and A Midwife's Tale and the Social Web: the class book Web course interdisciplinary faculty development project at the University of Maine

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## 1. University of Maine class book project

*Robert C. White*

Greetings from the United States, from the beautiful state of Maine, and from the University of Maine. I am Dr Robert White, Dean of the Division of Lifelong Learning, and it is a pleasure to join the second annual conference on World-Wide Web Applications in Johannesburg, South Africa through the Web from our new off-campus Hutchinson Center in Belfast, Maine. For the University of Maine this is a first, that is, delivering a paper from three different locations using a variety of technologies.

The University of Maine's Division of Lifelong Learning promotes learning as a continuous and lifelong process. We provide a broad spectrum of educational programmes and services, primarily for the ongoing needs of adult learners and organizations. Serving over 40 000 individuals annually, our division extends university resources to non-traditional and non-matriculating constituencies. For the past five years, we have experienced significant growth in all categories of our programmemeing. However, with increased faculty interest in developing distance learning opportunities, especially with faculty grants to develop courses for television, compressed video, Internet delivery, and often hybrids thereof, we extend our institution's reach statewide and beyond. Our programmes are specifically designed to enhance quality of life, empower individuals and organizations and improve professional practice. Through the use of technologies, we extend the reach of our mission while

responding to the educational needs of a diverse population.

In April 2000, the University of Maine's Division of Lifelong Learning earned the prestigious Phillip E. Frandson Award for Innovative Programmement. University Continuing Education Association presented the award to the University of Maine for its 1999 class book project, based on the national best seller by James W. Loewen (1996), entitled, *Lies my teacher told me: everything your American history textbook got wrong*. This unique programme is exemplary of our public University's outreach and access mission.

Annually since 1992, the Faculty Senate, on the basis of nominations from students, faculty and staff, selects the University of Maine class book. The goal of the class book is to raise the level of discourse on campus by creating common intellectual territory, requiring all first-year students to read the text as part of their ENG 101 English Composition course. Seminars and related group discussions occur throughout the year and many faculties include the text in other courses to broaden the level of campus dialogue on the themes and issues raised by the author.

In 1999 the Division of Lifelong Learning added a class book community programme to the mix of class book events. Led by a panel of University of Maine faculty, these moderated book discussions challenged participants to consider the 'myths and misinformation of American history'. And, on 30 March 2000, participants travelled to the Orono campus for several panel discussions; an exhibit of selected high school history textbooks addressed in the Loewen text; a demonstration of distance learning technologies; a private reception and dinner honoring the author; and a public lecture featuring the author.

The other element of the class book programme, and the basis of this presentation, was a three-credit interdisciplinary course, INT 490 Lies, Deception and Heroification, developed by a 15-member faculty team. Using the Loewen text as its centerpiece, the team designed INT 490 to meet general education requirements, to serve as a faculty development opportunity related to the use of Internet technologies, and to extend the academic reach of the campus.

Over 300 people accessed the two major components of the class book programme. These included people in the community programme and INT 490 course; those attending the 30 March on-campus events; and all employees of the Division of Lifelong Learning whose professional development activities included reading the 1999 class book and participating in a faculty-led discussion.

Flexibility and convenience are the hallmarks of distance and asynchronous instructional technologies. Today it is a pleasure to enjoy the flexibility and convenience provided through the Web to introduce my colleagues. Dr. James Toner, Director of Distance Education and Associate Director of the University's Continuing Education Division, joins you personally in Johannesburg. Dr. Carol Nordstrom Toner, a faculty member in the University of Maine's History Department and also coordinator of the Maine Studies Programme, joins us from the University of Maine campus in Orono, Maine. Each will describe their roles and experiences in this programme recognized for its creativity and innovation.

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## **2. Class book Web course interdisciplinary faculty development programme**

*James Francis Toner, Director, Distance Education*

Sadly, many people's lives pass with little attention to the richness of the present moment.

Our lives speed through time like lightning. People rarely find time to enjoy sunsets or philosophize about the meaning of life. Most citizens make little attempt to transcend the routine workday.

Too busy carrying life's daily burdens, most have no time to wait for the loon's call, to listen to a songbird's tune, to wonder about the quality of their lives, or to contemplate options for the future.

At the beginning of the 21st century, we can get caught up in the details of our daily lives and forget to think about the larger issues that give life meaning. But at the beginning of the 21st century, societies differ in an important way. Today, communities linked by digital technology make it possible for individuals to transcend the barriers of time and space, allowing many more people the opportunity to pursue lifelong learning.

Distance is no longer an obstacle to higher education. Many people in Maine towns today enjoy taking college courses from a distance through television and computer technologies. And, higher education is also possible for people with severe time constraints. Students take many courses asynchronously on the Internet, meaning students may do the course work at their own pace and at their own convenience.

Flexibility and convenience are the hallmarks of distance and asynchronous instructional technologies. Distance students throughout Maine (and throughout the world!) access the University through interactive television, video conferencing, computer conferencing, telephone conferencing, the Internet, audio and video recordings and streaming media.

What do these new technologies mean for local people and global neighbours? It means single parents living hundreds of miles from the University can continue their education by taking synchronous (i.e. live) courses on television at more than 100 state-wide locations. Students can also take asynchronous courses on a home computer – any time, any place. Students no longer need to occupy a certain desk in a certain classroom in a certain building on a certain campus. Homebound people with disabilities also enjoy the opportunity to access higher education from the desktop of their home computer.

Distance technologies also bring professors and students from around the world to participate in the University of Maine's courses. Maine professors are able to instruct their distance students from a research center in Brazil, a university in Cairo, or from whatever part of the world their research takes them. International students, too, take University of Maine classes, bringing people together as a world-wide community of learners. With the convenience of distance and asynchronous education, students everywhere can contemplate the power of a poem, the beauty of an equation, or the history of diverse peoples.

As Dr White has outlined, the University of Maine class book programme engages all first-year students in a common text to enhance English 101 – English Composition. For the academic year 1998–1999, the Faculty Senate chose *Lies my teacher told me: everything your American history textbook got wrong* by James W. Loewen.

The provost, vice president for academic affairs and the dean of lifelong learning asked me, as director of distance education, to take the lead in the development of an upper level Web-based course built around the Loewen book. After consulting with the academic department chairs, the director formed an advisory committee and solicited professor nominations for a team-taught interdisciplinary course that would also serve as a faculty development project in Web-based learning.

Fifteen professors then developed a syllabus, which was approved by the undergraduate

programme and curriculum committee as INT490 Lies, Deception, and Heroification. INT490 explores the theme of 'heroification' as it is developed by Loewen, who maintains that the creation of sanitized heroic figures in high school history textbooks, social archetypes rather than human beings, create not only 'culture-serving distortion' but boring and inaccurate history.

'Distance learners and teachers pioneer turn-of-the-century higher education and universities weave webs and develop virtual real estate in cyberspace.'

'Higher education entrepreneurs lead the development of educational Web space as universities scramble to establish a meaningful 21st century identity and agenda.'

'Distance teaching and distance learning redefine modern notions of instructional support as the new multimedia sweeps into education and universities require faculty development and technical assistance.'

I wrote the three quotes above but do we read headlines or hear radio news with subjects like the three quotes above? Will 'conventional wisdom' confirm these three statements? If these three statements are fact, what does that mean? What roles will universities play in the 'education supermarkets' of the cyber revolution?

At the core of these questions are university professors. How do university professors prepare for asynchronous learning environments where students have more flexibility in scheduling and pace in completing assignments? How can the university administration fulfil responsibilities to faculty development in distance learning, Web course development, instructional design, information technology, new multimedia and technical support, graduate assistantships, grants and compensation? How can the University of Maine story help other learning organizations and communities of interest benefit from Maine's 12-year experience in distance learning through technology?

## **2.1 Outcomes**

INT490 is now a regular University of Maine offering on the Web, open to students anywhere in the world. The Graduate School has approved INT490, plus the major term paper, as LIB500, Seminar in Liberal Studies for credit toward the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies.

Using the INT490 process as a model, in the fall of 1999 eight professors created INT491, *A Midwife's Tale and the Social Web*, as a new Web course and faculty development project based on *A midwife's tale* (Ulrich and Laslocky, 1991), the 1999–2000 class book. Weekly INT490/LIB500 and INT491 faculty meetings built community of interest in teaching.

In September, the class book Web course advisory committee will seek approval for a third interdisciplinary Web course and faculty development project based on class book, 2000–2001, *The color of water* by James McBride (1997). In November, the committee will seek approval for a fourth project, based on class book, 2001–2002, *Hearts in Atlantis* by Stephen King(2000).

To create a programme to develop Web-based teaching skills, lifelong learning administrators and professors found it helpful to build a Web course, in conjunction with a successful programme already existing across the University, that would provide the learning laboratory for professors. In the Maine case, a Senate-endorsed, 8-year-old class book programme provided a foundation to transform appropriate face-to-face teaching to

cyberspace. The chief academic officer provided the initial incentive. The English Department's class book coordinator enthusiastically supported the concept. The chairperson of the University programme and curriculum committee helped the proposal gain approval. The class book author, James Loewen, eagerly participated in the course. Fifteen professors assumed responsibility for a portion or all of one of more lessons, and worked with new media designers to create an environment to create a dynamic seminar for this controversial topic.

## **2.2 Sample evaluative comments from James Loewen, professors and students**

'I was impressed with the effect of the class book program on members of the faculty who participated. It is always hard to get professors to talk with each other, across disciplines, especially when discussing a book and issues relating thereto that are not precisely within their bailiwick. At meetings with professors, there was enthusiastic give-and-take. Faculty members make useful connections across disciplines. It was a fascinating experience for me to talk with so many professors who had read my book seriously and had, unlike myself, taught from it. I'd do it again in a flash and consider my book and myself honored by the opportunity' (James Loewen, author, *Lies my teacher told me*).

'I enjoyed teaching INT490 over the Web for, among other reasons, the intensity of the writing from students and faculty. Because writing is the means of communication in a Web course, students really have the opportunity to sharpen their rhetorical skills' (Harvey Kail, Associate Professor of English and the Director of the University of Maine Writing Center).

'I know that Web-based courses are the wave of the future ... the asynchronous nature of the courses offers advantages for the student' (Robert Whelan, Associate Professor in the Department of English).

'I believe that so many more choices can be made available to students taking courses on the Web than in an ordinary classroom' (Tina Passman, Chair for the Department of Modern Languages and Classics).

'Because it is on the Web, I can work at any time rather than sit in a class. I have taken two other classes on the Web and overall they were good experiences. I have always had an interest in history, so I thought this would be a good class to take' (38-year-old senior in the Bachelor of University Studies programme).

'This class has been beneficial to me in many ways. It has opened up a new perspective on history for me, and allowed me to be more critical of the past. I really enjoyed the class discussions and input for it motivated me to think more critically about history, consider biases, and to develop my own conflicting opinions at times. This class has required me to manage my time and I feel that each and every lesson and assignment I completed was done carefully and often was time consuming in order to produce an innovative paper. I have also learned the benefit of technology in education, and I must say that I have learned a lot about cyberspace and how it can be more useful to my learning' (education/history student, Holden, Maine).

'You can "attend" class at a time that is convenient to you. You can attend class in your pajamas, if you like. You don't have to travel to a campus. All the class work is done on the computer so you do not have to keep track of notebooks or make sure you have a pen or pencil handy. Research tools (academic Web site, interlibrary card catalog) are just a switch of the screen away. You can ask your professor as many questions as you like ... I love being able to go to class whenever I like and having the option to be as comfortable as I like – pillows to sit on while at my computers, as much coffee, tea, or hot cocoa as I like, and

snacks to enjoy. Thanks. I learned SO MUCH, but most importantly, I gained a great deal of confidence in myself as a learner' (a 'distance student' in Bachelor of University Studies programme).

'I feel empowered by these lessons. They have helped clarify how I feel about what I wouldn't normally give a second thought. This is more than an examination of a man's book, more than a history course; it's an exercise in introspection' (journalism student, South Portland, Maine).

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### **3. Empowering the margins: how the Web helps brings marginalized people into the college classroom**

*Carol Toner, Assistant Professor of History, University of Maine*

I have participated in teaching both University of Maine distance courses featured in this presentation, namely *Lies, Deception, and Heroification* and *A Midwife's Tale and the Social Web*. These multidisciplinary courses involved faculty from the history, English, women's studies, education, sociology, and biology departments. My own contribution was to bring a historical perspective to the classes. As a women's historian and a labour historian, I was delighted to find that the technology helped bring marginalized people into the class. By this I mean that the technology enabled us to include a more diverse population in the class content, and the technology also brought distance students into the class.

In both courses, we wanted students to deconstruct history, that is, to question their assumptions about historical content and methodology. The 'Lies' class used as its major text James Loewen's book, *Lies my teacher told me*, and *A midwife's tale* focused on Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's book of the same title. James Loewen encourages us to deconstruct American history by questioning the heroic national narratives presented in most high school history texts. Loewen argues that American history courses tell a glorified story of American political, military, and economic history to the exclusion of workers, women, immigrants, native Americans, slaves, and other minorities. Our goal in both courses was to present a more inclusive American history, and at the same time encourage students to think critically. We were determined not to 'spoon feed' students facts about American history, but to get them to think about causation in American history. We wanted students to leave these classes thinking not just how 'great men' shape history, but how gender, class, race and ethnicity shape American history. We also wanted students to do more than just read the work of other historians; we wanted students to become historians themselves by reading and interpreting primary documents.

We taught these courses entirely on the Web and discovered that the electronic classroom suited our needs in three important ways: by providing the materials which revealed a more diverse view of American history, by providing a structure which encouraged greater student-to-student interaction, and by providing access for distance students. The 'electronic classroom', therefore, helped deconstruct the national narrative while at the same time nurturing a less hierarchical and more inclusive classroom.

The instructors in these courses provided an enormous amount of relevant sources for student research projects. While more traditional history classes might include a text, perhaps several monographs, and sometimes a collection of sources, these Web-based courses provided access to scores of sources, both primary and secondary. The electronic library included sources such as slave letters, newspaper accounts of strikes, descriptions of sweat shops, Native American legends, World War II posters, songs, radio advertisements, 19th century medical references, Library of Congress exhibits, and court cases, among many other

resources. Through these sources, students examined American history 'from the bottom up,' bringing focus to groups and issues traditionally marginalized in American history.

With access to such diverse sources, the students pursued research with great enthusiasm. Assignments sent students searching through the various sources and onto the Internet as well. With access to so much information, students found their own answers – constructed their own understanding of the material – rather than following a grand narrative envisioned by the professor. We discussed how to examine various documents, how to detect bias, how to think about the uses and limitations of various sources, so that students studied primary documents and drew their own conclusions rather than memorizing historical facts. They learned not only content but also historical methodology and critical thinking.

An English professor who participated in these courses praised the electronic classroom for its emphasis on the written word. Although some students type and send quick messages, more often the discussions reflect thoughtful student ideas. The text-based nature of Web courses gives students a chance to think about their responses before hitting 'send,' resulting in more carefully worded student responses. For those distance students who needed extra help with their writing skills, the courses offered a link to the campus writing center. Students were able to e-mail people at the campus writing center and arrange a meeting, either on-line or on the phone. And of course students could get help by sending their papers electronically to the writing center.

We also discovered that the technology shaped communications in the electronic classroom. In a traditional classroom the teacher stands in front and lectures while the students listen. By contrast, our electronic classroom was discussion based and more Web shaped. The threads of the discussions most often connected students to other students, and there was no 'front of the room' for the instructors. The electronic discussion empowered the students, making the course more democratic. Students shared their interpretations of the documents with other students, generating as much or more discussion than the instructors generated. The amount of student involvement in the course was greater than any of us had experienced in a regular classroom.

These Web courses also empowered the margins by including many distance students who would not have been able to attend a campus course. More than 70% of our distance students are women, and their average age is 45. Most of our students have child-rearing obligations or jobs or both. Many of these distance students live in remote areas of rural Maine with little or no chance to attend courses on campus. The University of Maine System includes seven campuses in a state that covers a large geographical area, leaving many residents far from a university campus. Web-based courses allow students to take college courses from their own homes, from University of Maine System receive sites, or from their town's library. And because campus students also enroll in Web courses, the technology brings distance and campus learners together.

Many distance students have told me that they appreciate the opportunity to further their education, but they assumed that in an electronic classroom they would miss the feeling of a close learning community. Many in higher education malign teaching with technology and characterize the technology as a barrier to classroom communication. In fact, I find that Web-based courses nurture a remarkably close learning community, to the point where some students arrange to meet outside of class (both electronically and face to face), and others confess they will miss 'this community' when the class ends. I would argue that a tight learning community usually does develop with distance technologies, and not in spite of, but because of the technology. For example, students might be discussing the history of midwives in the formal class discussion area, while in the chat rooms they shared their own or their friends' childbearing stories.

Finally, Web-based courses offer students a chance to hone their computer skills. One student said she felt she got 'two for one' in a Web-based class – she learned the class content and computer skills as well. The number of Internet users doubles every month, which is just one indication that computer skills are central to today's world, especially in more isolated areas such as rural Maine. Non-traditional students, rural students, women students – people usually marginalized in our increasingly technological economy – now enjoy greater opportunities to pursue higher education, thanks to technology.

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