Improving and Expanding the eFiles Assignment Database

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Abstract: This paper describes and analyzes the eFiles assignment database as it stands at the end of the Spring 2007 semester. Additionally, it offers strategies for improving the database and increasing its visibility.

Overview

This year, the pedagogy workgroup has focused on updating the eFiles website, making two types of changes to increase the usefulness of this resource. Concentrating on the technology itself, the group attempted to create a more user-friendly interface for the site, one that would allow student instructors to easily navigate and search the site, as well as making it easier to submit content to the site. During weekly meetings, the group brainstormed a standardized template for submitting assignments, one that would enable all users to contribute content and to quickly find relevant assignments. The pedagogy workgroup also worked to improve the content of the site, by evaluating not only the functionality of the database, but the usefulness of assignments submitted. Besides soliciting assignments from instructors, importing a number of assignments from others interested in pedagogy, and creating assignments themselves, the group also attempted to ensure that the site contains assignments that are helpful to student instructors, with clearly stated pedagogical aims and placement within a lesson plan.

In the spring semester, the group focused on testing the new database and increasing the number of assignments posted. In completing both aims, the group encountered obstacles. A formal testing of the site was postponed because of the complexity of conducting such a test. Although group members attempted to solicit assignments, and the group

posted a call for assignments on the CWRL homepage, few student instructors responded. The Workgroup also began to use the ActiveCollab project management program to organize its meetings, and group members posted regularly to *Blogging Pedagogy.*

Problem

Throughout the past semester, the CWRL pedagogy workgroup has been building a database of assignments and class activities for RHE 306, 309, 312 and English 314 and 316 courses offered through the Department of Rhetoric and Writing and the English Department. Although the user interface is now refined and in place, the workgroup has had less success soliciting new contributions to the site. This paper seeks to identify key steps that can be taken to capture more content from Teaching Assistants, Assistant Instructors and Professors.

Causes
Currently, a lack of contributors to the eFiles database seems to stem from two distinct issues. First, the CWRL's eFiles site needs to achieve a greater amount of visibility. There are no external links to it, and instructors often forget that it is available. Second, as the semester gets busier, instructors are far less likely to take time out of their schedules to post assignments to the database. This being the case, it appears that the database will be of the greatest use to instructors at the beginning of each semester, when they are doing more planning and have more of an opportunity to share those lesson plans and assignments using eFiles.

Remedies and Objectives
Those working on the eFiles system should look to get the site more visibility early in the semester and should aim for more habitual use. In light of these goals, future developers of the system should establish links with the Fall 398T classes and the Teaching Masterworks 383L classes and formally introduce the database as a resource. The goal here will be to encourage instructors who are in the early stages of course planning and teaching to use the database as a resource, as well as contribute to it. To this end, several concrete steps can be taken before the fall 2007 semester, as well as early on in the semester.

Steps for the Future

Summer 2007

In the fall of 2006, the CWRL pedagogy workgroup created a format for inputting assignments into the eFiles database. During the 2007 spring semester, the workgroup began soliciting and contributing assignments to the database. Though contributions to the eFiles assignment database by Teaching Assistants and Assistant Instructors have been minimal in the first half of 2007, the fall semester presents a fresh opportunity for increasing such contributions. As new TAs and AIs begin to plan courses, the site will be an important resource. However, in order for the database to reach its full potential, the development over the summer months will be crucial.

1. This summer, LAITS is funding two positions that will be devoted entirely to development of the eFiles assignment database. The responsibilities of these GRAs should include:

- Continuing the ongoing task of adding content to the database. Currently, particular emphasis needs to be placed on 312, 314, and 316 sections of the database.
- Continuing to adjust the eFiles website for increased usability.
- Establishing ties with both the Undergraduate Writing Center and the ADs in charge of 398T and 383L, so that these three units do not overlap in terms of content or miss out on relevant information.
- Working with the Division of Rhetoric and Writing (DRW) ADs so that incoming AIs for RHE 306 are introduced to the database during orientation in late summer.

2. The CWRL should actively introduce the database to instructors during the CWRL orientation in late summer.

3. In the past, the DRW has worked on developing course materials for RHE 306 but not for courses such as 309 and 312. The DRW ADs will be spending this summer working on developing course materials for rhetoric courses besides 306. Obviously, this is a natural fit with the goals of the eFiles database. CWRL developers should be in close contact with the DRW ADs to make sure that relevant course planning materials are added to the database.

4. The CWRL pedagogy workgroup should email weekly or bi-monthly "featured" assignments to TAs and AIs. This will be most effective if it happens as early as possible in the fall. By the end of the summer, the eFiles GRAs should obtain relevant email lists, as well as determine which assignments should be sent out in the first few weeks of September. This should facilitate an easy transition between the summer and fall developer teams.

5. With a compressed teaching schedule over the summer, there is likely to be a greater need for more classroom activities and assignments. GRAs should attempt to make early contact with summer instructors, both to increase awareness of the database, as well as to solicit assignments.

Fall 2007
1. Members of next year's pedagogy workgroup should visit all sections of 398T and 383L early in the semester to introduce eFiles to new AIs and TAs as well as answer their questions about the site. This means that next year's workgroup should set an early goal of planning these class visits.

2. Members of the workgroup should speak to both Diane Davis and Linda Ferreira-Buckley about incorporating the database into the 398T syllabus. Specifically, it would be helpful if one 398T assignment would be to post an assignment or lesson plan to the database.

3. The workgroup should, as part of its weekly duties, send out a "featured" assignment from the database via email. The email should contain a link to eFiles as well as abbreviated instructions for using the site.

Other Goals

It has taken a relatively short amount of time for the workgroup to generate dozens of assignments that include all relevant materials, such as handouts or web links, that an instructor might need. Additionally, the range of topics that the assignments cover is broad: from context to controversy mapping, from visual rhetoric to researching and close reading. However, there are still several ways to improve the site.

Technology Gap
While there have been a number of assignments added to the eFiles database across a number of courses, the overwhelming majority of these assignments are technology-based. While this sometimes means little more than showing a video clip in class, other assignments and activities do require students to interact with computers. The result is that these assignments are helpful only to instructors who teach in CWRL labs. When collecting more assignments for the database, the pedagogy workgroup should work harder to incorporate more "low-tech" assignments that can be implemented in any classroom.

Beginning of the Year Assignments
The majority of the assignments on the database are currently geared toward introducing concepts, rather than providing practice with them. As a result, the majority of assignments currently in the database are of greatest use early in the semester, when instructors are introducing topics. The overall result is that the database becomes less useful as the semester wears on. The pedagogy workgroup should target for inclusion assignments that can be used in the middle and end parts of the semester.

Conclusion

The pedagogy workgroup has already begun to make substantial improvements to the functionality and content of the eFiles site. In the future, summer GRAs and CWRL developers can work to make the site an even more helpful resource. The suggestions submitted in this paper should help these groups identify and correct potential problems they will encounter. By working closely with next year's 398T and 383L classes, the pedagogy workgroup can accomplish the goals set forward here, and create a valuable online resource for all instructors.