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Computers & Education 47 (2006) 399–413

**COMPUTERS &
EDUCATION**

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Teaching e-commerce Web page evaluation and design: a pilot study using tourism destination sites

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Received 29 March 2004; accepted 1 November 2004

Abstract

This study explores a teaching method for improving business students' skills in e-commerce page evaluation and making Web design majors aware of business content issues through cooperative learning. Two groups of female students at a Japanese university studying either tourism or Web page design were assigned tasks that required cooperation to investigate whether a minimum of formal training and interaction between the two groups would result in an increase in the "design" students' awareness of content issues in page design, and an improvement in the "tourism" students' ability to evaluate Web pages related to tourism. The results showed only slight improvements, suggesting that either the amount of cooperative learning must be increased or some formal instruction must be introduced.

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Keywords: Applications in subject areas; Human–computer interface; Improving classroom teaching; Interdisciplinary projects; Post-secondary education

1. Introduction

Educators have responded to the explosive growth of the Internet by emphasizing the importance of computer or information literacy for all students. Beyond the basics, which hopefully students learn before reaching college or university, students majoring in business should be able to

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evaluate commercial Web pages and Web design majors should know something about business content. Unfortunately, many business majors do not study Web design and students specializing in Web design may not have time for courses in business. This has contributed to the problem, often mentioned in the literature, of the conflict between design and content in websites (e.g., Loban, 1998, p. 69; Nardini, Linden, Mayman, Reardon, & Shimp, 2002, p. 56). Further, it puts our students at a disadvantage when they join the workforce. To solve this problem without overhauling the curriculum, we thought to make use of our students' existing Internet skills and the advanced ICT climate in Japan to improve business students' skills in e-commerce page evaluation and at the same time to make Web design majors more aware of business content issues.

This study was undertaken to see if encouraging cooperative learning between students majoring in Web design and students majoring in a business field would be sufficient, without specific instruction or major additions to the course syllabi, (1) to make the design students more aware of e-commerce content needs, and (2) to improve the business majors' Web page evaluation skills. We were fortunate in having classes that suited our research purpose well: students in the "design" class were learning to become professional Web page designers. We used tourism as an example of a business field; the students in the "tourism" class were studying the impact of the Internet on tourism. We expected that at least some of the "design" students would seek a career in Web page design and that some of the "tourism" students would become travel professionals whose duties might include designing a travel-oriented website.

Specifically, we hoped to learn through this pilot study what kinds of data could be collected and if that data would throw any light on issues such as these:

- How well the "design" students' evaluation criteria compared with those made by professionals.
- What differences there were between untrained ("tourism") and trained ("design") students in evaluating Web pages.
- What effect interaction between the untrained and trained students would have on the former's ability to evaluate Web pages and the latter's understanding of business content issues.

The focus in this study was on the effect of the interaction of two groups of students who had received no instruction in the other group's specialty. The "design" students were given no information about the needs of the tourism business, and the "tourism" students were not taught directly principles of Web page evaluation.

We first review the existing literature on our topic and then describe the setting of our experiment. After presenting and discussing the data, we conclude with a discussion of the significance of our findings for educators teaching Web page design and e-commerce. We want to emphasize at the outset that the research presented here is a pilot experiment with a small number of subjects that did not permit analyses of validity and reliability.

2. Previous research

Much has been written about the design of websites from the human engineering, user interface, training, business, and usability perspectives. Jakob Nielsen's work is typical of this area; his

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