

A fusion of aesthetics, functionality and content: Showcasing the use of online unit public pages

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Abstract

The use of public pages for study units helps to promote strategic aims of the university in the provision of information gateways, ease of access to and global sharing of information, marketing, student decision making and the promotion of e-learning. Using a case study and examples the paper will show why and how a team of people with skills in graphic and web design, educational development, e-learning and content expertise marry the requirements of aesthetics, functionality and content to develop a series of public pages, including splash pages, to establish a visual identity for and textual information about a unit of study.

Keywords

public pages, splash pages, aesthetics, functionality, e-learning

Introduction

Public pages are accessible to everyone with an Internet connection. Approximately 800 units at Macquarie University have public pages that lead to a WebCT password-protected site. Many of these public web pages strive to capture a richness and depth of what might be learned through engagement with a particular unit in a particular context. They seek to impart forms of knowing and understanding, an idea of the skills and techniques, the conventions and practices, the communicative genres, values and ethos of the unit. Graphic and web design and engaging content is combined to create these pages.

Current practices

There has been little academic preoccupation with the purposes and uses of public pages in the learning arena and there is no quantitative research on the usefulness of these in online learning environments. For public relations purposes, the use of enticing public pages for courses, including videos, is considered desirable (Tedeschi, 2004). The University of Central Florida (UCF) uses public pages to present a comprehensive online syllabus to 'convey the direction of the course and the personality of the instructor [and they] are helpful to students who are shopping for a course, particularly for those students who will never "meet" the instructor in person. Although these pages are professional in appearance, an effort is made to adopt a welcoming, informal tone ... The typical online UCF public pages include a course description, learner-centred objectives, what you expect from the learner, what the learner can expect ... a schedule, protocols and a syllabus' (Truman-Davis et al., 1999). Similarly, the Regents Online Degree Programs (2005) web site shows abbreviated course syllabi on public pages for prospective students.

Navigating to the public pages

Commercial sites are not all noted for their ease of navigation (Betts, 2005) so the model of good navigation is not omnipresent although it is considered important in university web sites (University of Wisconsin, 2001), where the home page leads to other study locations such as library services (Welsh, 2005) and departmental sites. In most universities, units are outlined in printed and online handbooks and a teaching department's public pages. Prospective students usually initially navigate their way to a unit's public page from a departmental or divisional web page or from search engines via metatags and keywords inserted by the web designer (Greenstreet, 2005), from the student site or, if already enrolled, from their student portal. Unit public pages at Macquarie University are more directly accessed via the list of WebCT units at online public pages (see Macquarie University, Online public pages).

Why are public pages used?

Unit public pages are used for these reasons at Macquarie University:

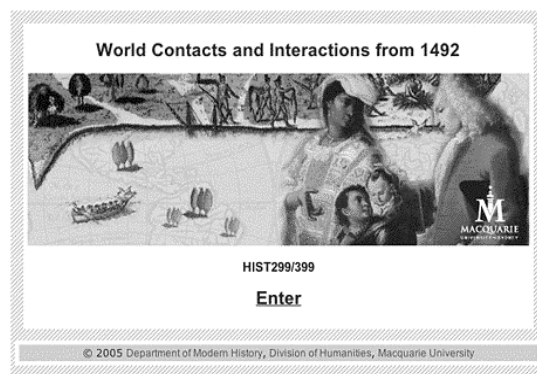
- *Marketing.* They give essential information to prospective students before they enrol. See *What information goes on the public pages?* below for examples of inclusions.
- *Information sharing.* The pages assist students in deciding on units of study. Macquarie University students can change their selection of units during the first week of a semester; students may ‘shop around’ as they look for units that most suit their needs. Online information in public pages can obviate the need to base decisions on hearsay or knock on lecturers’ doors asking for unit outlines.
- *Gateway.* The public pages contain links to other pages or sites of interest, and to the password protected pages. A public page might have links to its teaching department, the library, the student portal and the main Macquarie University site. There are often links to generic skills courses, international databases or other universities, as we will see in the case study.
- *Global sharing.* Any information that is not confidential or copyrighted to other sources can be placed here. As the case study below will show, public pages can strengthen international collaboration.
- *Ease of access.* Students create bookmarks in their browsers for direct access to screens they need.
- *Promotion of understanding of e-learning, teaching and research.* The public pages often introduce the idea of e-learning and explain why the unit is online, and promote the use of electronically-facilitated research through the provision of links to recommended sites.

Accessibility of pages by potential students who are disabled is essential. Macquarie University’s Centre for Flexible Learning uses guidelines to create sites accessible by people with motor skill deficiencies and those with sight impairment. As more units and whole-of-program courses come online, the University is implementing a *Visual Identity Guide*, which governs design elements such as layout, the use of divisional colours and fonts, and provides guidelines for inclusions.

Let’s start with the splash page

Splash pages act as a ‘transition moment’; they set the scene for what is to come and provide clues about the identity of the unit. From the splash page of our case study, HIST299/399, *World Contacts and Interactions from 1492*, you might be able to guess that this will be a visually sophisticated unit, rich in imagery and colour, to do with different cultures and movement by sea.

The image is designed to arouse interest in progressing to the next stage via the Enter button.



What information goes on public pages?

The splash page enters into the unit’s public home page, which may also contain a series of linked pages. These might have any of the following components, as decided by the unit convenor:

- *Description.* Usually a paragraph or two, often from the University Handbook.
- *Learning outcomes, aims and objectives.*
- *Assessment guidelines.* The basics about marks for assignments and the exam, usually tabulated.
- *Workload.* Are there weekly submissions and is there group work? A description of the workload expected in hours of readings, time to be spent in web searches, lab. sessions, etc.
- *Prerequisites.* What units are prerequisite or corequisite? Is there a recommended study path?
- *Textbooks.* Students may wish to obtain their books before the beginning of semester.
- *Offering types.* The semester in which the unit is offered, whether day, evening or distance mode and if partly or fully online.
- *Convenor.* Contact details: phone, fax, email, room location and number, consulting hours. A photo.
- *Student work.* Some sites showcase previous students’ (and lecturer’s) work.

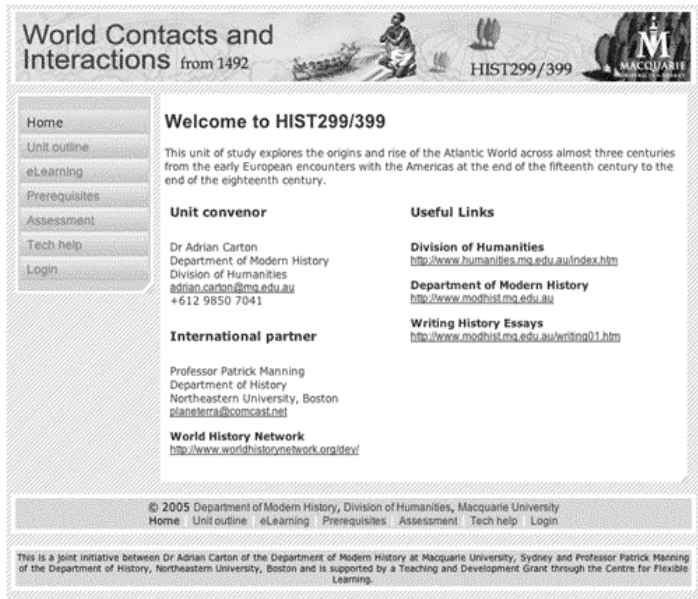
Unit public home page

The case study shows a home page with the convenor’s welcome, name and contact details, as well as that of an international partner, and some useful links. Listed down the left-hand side are the component public pages: the unit outline, a note about e-learning, unit prerequisites, assessment, technical help and a login to the password-protected area for enrolled students.

Quality graphic design combined with ease of navigation produce an aesthetically appealing and functional series of pages.

This unit is part of Macquarie University’s major in the area of World and Global History in the Division of Humanities, where all the units include online teaching. HIST299/399 involves

students in a parallel world history unit at Northeastern University, Boston. It provides the environment for collaborations and interactions across borders and oceans between students at the two institutions, enhancing the transfer of generic skills from a local to a world context. The public pages attempt to indicate that in this unit web-based interactions will help students to keep abreast of a fast-paced 21st century global learning environment where strategic mentorship, unit subject material and student expectations demand a world view. The project was designed to promote excellence by offering Australian and American approaches to the teaching of world history with high quality, innovative and flexible access to learning resources to reach beyond the local environment and to promote access and equity by giving local students direct access to global opportunities. An essential element of the world history program requires students to engage in global thinking and consider their responsibilities as students in a global university.



Examples

Table 1 lists examples of unit public pages that show this concern for a blending of graphic design, often determined by the nature of the content, with web design issues such as ease of navigation and content.

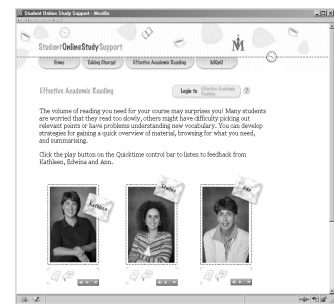
Table 1: Selection of Macquarie University public pages that hyperlink to online units from online.mq.edu.au/am/unit_list_alphabetical.html



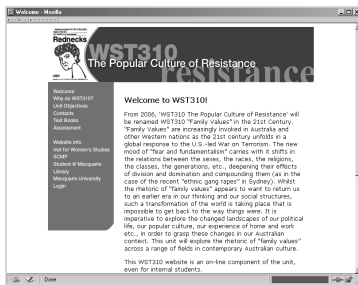
CHIR835 Orthopaedics. Splash page, monotone, graphic design suggests clinical process.



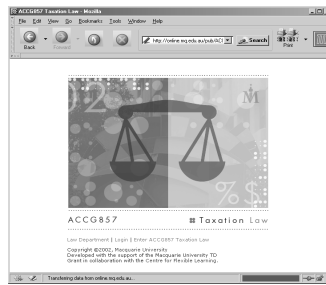
ECED886 Image, Speech, Text and the Child. Haunting intertextual design.



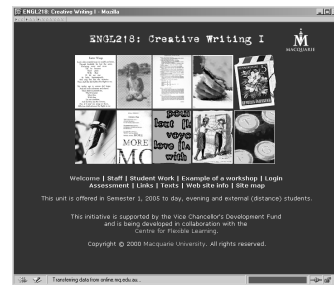
UCHSREAD Effective Academic Reading. Conversational, audio tips from peers.



WST310 The popular culture of resistance. Quirky, engaging. Early (2001) example.



ACCG857 Taxation Law. Splash page, suggests simplicity and order, links to essential info.



ENGL218 Creative Writing I. Fun images, rollovers, links to information and student work.

Conclusion

Public pages, including splash pages, are not just pretty pictures; they are a structured art form that serves the student learning community and university. Public pages reflect the excitement, diversity and richness of the university experience. Successful unit public pages require a fusing of elements of graphic design, functionality, for example in terms of ease of navigation, and content that is inviting, accessible and relevant to students.

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