February, 1995 - Thomas Mansheim. Urban Studies

Two years or so ago, Joe McLaughlin, Director of the Graduate Education Program, asked if I would consider teaching a graduate course titled Computers in the Curriculum. Given my longstanding interest in computers and their social impact, I accepted with alacrity. I had three years involvement with the Challenge Grant, later the Institute for the Advancement of Urban Education, that gave me some contact and experience with K-12 teachers. The new course proved to be one of the most exciting academic opportunities I have experienced in my thirty years of teaching.

Ten years before I had taken a similar course, which centered on "computer literacy." The course discussed Ram and Rom, input and output devices, CPU's and peripherals. At the end of the course, I had a good idea of theoretical basics, but only one opportunity to use the computer. I decided to bring use to the forefront. The question was, what would I use the computer for? Putting teachers on a computer with no specific purpose risked alienating those who might shy away from technology, particularly computers. Many journals, popular, business, and educational, were creating a public awareness of the Information Superhighway and the Internet. Using this access, the course would, I decided, center on a project developed for application in students' classrooms from resources obtained on the Internet. Hopefully, the pragmatic value of transferring the learning in the graduate course to immediate use in the classroom would dispel any computer phobia teachers had.

It has worked amazingly well. Many teachers started from no computer knowledge at all. Others had some basic computer skills. None had used the Internet. An overwhelming majority of the students have developed Internet skills and produced projects for their own classes. A number of the projects have been outstanding. Students from previous classes still write to me on e-mail. Two examples of projects (admittedly the best) will suffice. One student, a Newman Club chaplain, had a computer but had previously made little use of it. He did not see the personal significance of the course material at first. By the end of the term, he had developed a national network of Newman Clubs electronically linked and found himself the leader in this process, with a national reputation. Another student, teaching in a Catholic school, knew little about computers. By the end of the term, she did a demonstration for her principal and faculty colleagues and connected with the Internet through Saint Peter's. Her colleagues became very enthused about the possibilities, and her principal asked her to take responsibility for moving her school toward developing an Internet connection. Many other students found themselves becoming their schools' "experts" on the Internet. Some undoubtedly will find a niche for themselves as Internet experts and perhaps better themselves, in salary or promotion. Most students will be better prepared to use the Internet as a resource as we move into an information-driven twenty-first century.