Web Solution for Communicating with, Supporting, and Training Distance-Learning Faculty

Georgianna Laws, MEd
Augusta University

Abstract

Distance-learning support professionals (such as instructional designers, instructional technologists, and librarians) serve many instructors and face the dilemma of how to best reach all these faculty clients in a timely manner. The solution discussed here is a website used to distribute information and resources, facilitate reserving appointments, and much more.

Problem

Rather than having one main instructional-support services office, many public higher-education institutions with wide ranges of educational options prefer to offer embedded instructional designers, instructional technologists, and/or librarians to their various colleges. In this way, each such support specialist can really immerse him/herself in the context of his/her college's clients, offering more personalized services.

However, with campuses spanning vast urban areas, the high employment costs of "at the client's elbow" services, all balanced on a public-university budget, higher-education institutions need to assign one instructional-support service provider to multiple college clients.

Furthermore, the typical university website is centralized and few people are in charge of making updates for each college's webpages. With instructional support services being decentralized and web services being centralized, these support services staff members face a dilemma. How can they best communicate with their faculty clients? How can they efficiently support and/or train so many clients located in several parts of town without having a web presence allowing for just-in-time updates? This paper outlines how a web solution could address this dilemma and empower instructional-support specialists to more easily reach their clients.

Solution

The author of this paper is an instructional designer at a comprehensive institution with two main campuses in town (and multiple satellite campuses elsewhere). The author offers instructional-design services to three clients at this institution: one specializing in allied heath sciences, another specializing in dental medicine, and yet another specializing in Traditional Chinese Medicine as well as Chinese language and culture. These clients are spread across the Summerville and Health Sciences campuses and teach a combination of web-enhanced and web-only courses. Classes take place in about half a dozen buildings in Augusta, and faculty conduct research and/or hold office in these and other buildings, thus creating a vast physical footprint for one designer to cover.

In aiming to offer meaningful just-in-time training, support, and communication to all these clients, the author chose to invest in a website. The first logical method of implementing this solution was to look for a university-provided web page. But where to create the page? Within the first, second, or third client's web presence? Choosing one means leaving the others out. Choosing all means duplicating information. Another consideration has to do with the availability of a college-based webmaster to make changes, often multiple changes a day, to this web presence. The webmaster is already working hard to accommodate the needs of the entire college and cannot allocate the manpower needed to make such frequent modifications to just one of the many clients s/he serves.

Not having a web presence leads back to square one: how to best communicate, support, and train faculty? Email could be a solution but frequent emails would turn faculty off (they are already very busy with their classes, clinical practice, and research/grants).

Therefore, the author chose to invest in an independent website. After leadership sanctioned this decision, on condition that anything put out to faculty be of high quality, the author started with a free wordpress.com blog.

The Evolution of the Web Site

Wordpress.com

The early wordpress.com site helped the author distribute blog posts about timely information that faculty needed to know. For example, some of the earlier posts dealt with how to get your course ready for an upcoming semester (syllabus, content, resources, and LMS post-production).

When working with faculty on getting courses ready for the semester, the author would refer to the website (often emailing out a link to a specific blog post). The site then offered a master syllabus template, which increased site utilization, along with a search feature and a contact page. Traffic to this site was further increased by having a web presence in each client college's website (which linked to the author's geolawsdesign.com site).

The site needed an identity and it also had to look professional. The author chose a very simple and clean Wordpress template (dark gray text on white background) and branded it with custom-made graphics, including a logo. The logo states the service offered (i.e., instructional design") and includes the author's name and photo (so faculty would know who they were about to meet). Figure 1 provides an at-a-glance view of the site in the context of the *contact* page.
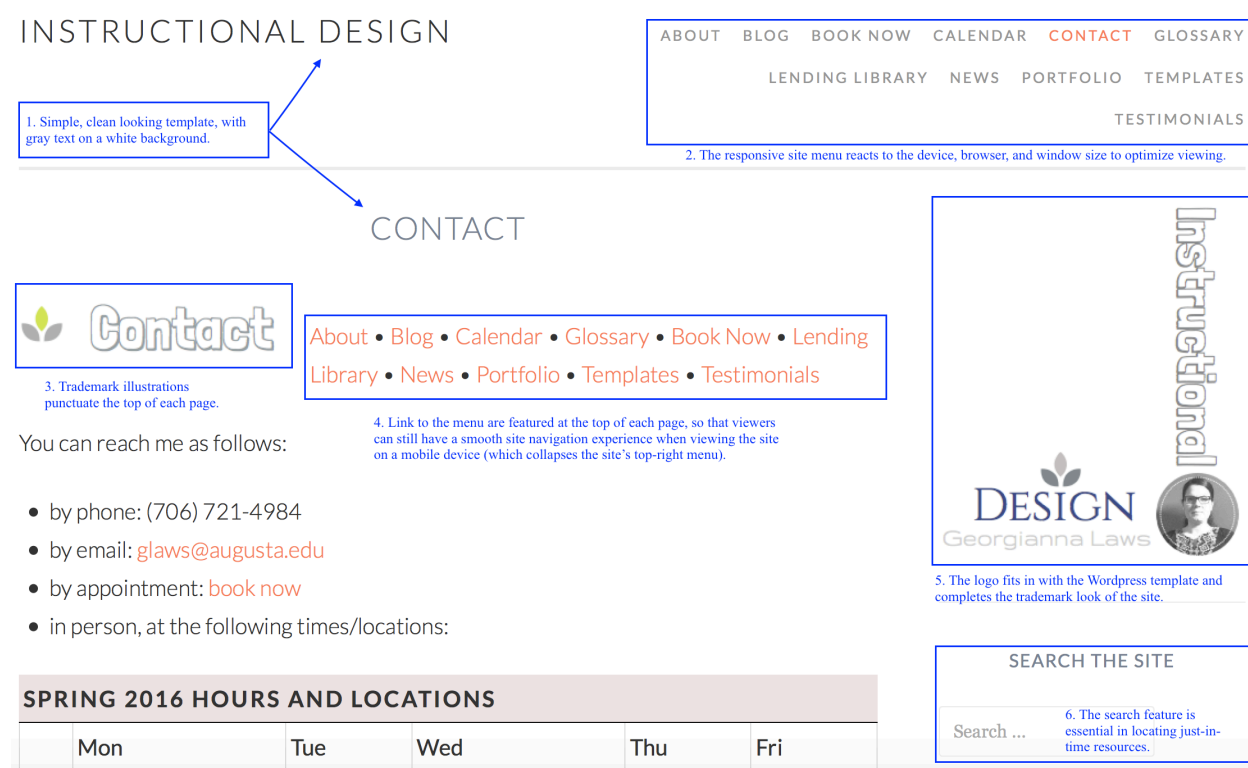

Figure 1: Site At A Glance (Contact Page)

As the blog scaled up in scope over the years, the same graphics were used consistently on each page, giving the site an overall unified look. Whenever a blog post surpassed the designer's subject matter expertise (say a post on how a particular instructional technology works), the designer partnered with SMEs to produce that article. Appropriate leadership approval was sought when communicating enterprise-wide information.

Wordpress.org

The site's domain name was free and thus very long and hard to remember. Also, the site itself was free and thus limited in capability. To address these concerns, the author found that the site would provide more value and be more likely to be accessed by the faculty for which it is intended if it were paid. Thus, in April 2015, came the move to wordpress.org and the shorter, more meaningful domain name the .com site has today[i].

As the site migrated from wordpress.com to wordpress.org, suddenly a whole array of new capabilities became possible (including more hand coding), as shown in the following alphabetized list of pages:

1. About

The *about* page was added to provide a variety of topics on the designer, to help faculty members learn who she is and how she can help. This page includes her mission and goals, her client groups, the scope of her design services, and the instructional-design method she uses. This page also hosts her traditional CV and her visual resume, a brief video introduction through which faculty can meet the designer, a selection of eLearning instructional-design articles that the designer curates on Scoop.it, information on the designer's conference presentations and publications, and more.

2. Blog

The *blog* page is the original page with which the site started in late 2014. It continues to offer articles useful to faculty members. One of the latest posts at the time of this article's publication had to do with a breakthrough in technology that allowed for the creation of a digital textbook that can think for itself as it provides each learner an individualized learning path, optimized for his/her unique way of learning.

Some posts include video tutorials, such as how to submit final grades in the learning management system (LMS) and in the academic record repository (Pounce) or how to make the best of the syllabus template. In general, videos that are devoid of HIPAA[ii] and FERPA[iii] protected information can go on the website and are closed captioned. All other videos (such as a tutorial on how to grade with the LMS, looking at an actual live gradebook, populated with student information) are private, can only be accessed by the designer and the client, and are not closed captioned due to the designer's limited time and the video's single use by a single client.

3. Book Now

The biggest improvement to the site was the addition of the *book now* page. Inspired by the type of site that service providers such as beauty salons and massage therapists use, this tool allows the end user (the faculty member) to generate appointments with the service provider at their convenience, out of times the provider has available. This not only saves time (otherwise spent in back-and-forth email negotiations about the day, time, place, and nature of the meeting), but it also proves to be an equitable way to offer first-come, first-served appointments to the hundreds of faculty members served by this one provider.

The author examined many free scheduling tools but in the end opted for a paid tool offered by *Acuity Scheduling*, which:
- looks professional
- allows for each service to be spelled out
- can insert custom time buffers in between meetings (so the designer can wrap up the paperwork for one meeting before starting another one)
- enables the use of an intake form (described in more detail in the next paragraph)
- allows for custom, automatic pre- and post-service emails to go out to the faculty clients
- allows the client to modify (or even cancel) the appointment at any time
- allows the clients to send the appointment to their university calendar and/or mobile phone calendar, to avoid a double booking through their other systems
- offers great analytics about how the designer's time is spent and how her services are utilized.

The scheduling page is shown in Figure 2, below.

Book Now

1. The same visual signage is used.

About • Blog • Calendar • Contact • Glossary • Lending Library • News • Portfolio • Templates • Testimonials

2. The same site menu appears at the top-right corner of the page.

| Choose | Your Info | Confirmation |

3. This is essentially an iFrame that displays information from the master Acuity Scheduling page.   Returning? Log in

Greetings!

I am using this system to allow you to quickly reserve time with me without needing to have back-and-forth communication about when and where to meet. The system knows when I am available; all you have to do is choose what day/time/place works for you. Both of us will be able to edit the meeting details, reschedule (or even cancel) our appointment, and copy to our Outlook calendar.

To begin creating your appointment, please click on the service/training desired from the list below. The scheduling system will guide you through the rest, a process which takes 1-3 minutes. You can choose to create a username/password to have the system remember you for subsequent appointments.

Note: In Spring 2016, I offer Monday and Wednesday afternoon appointments in the GC (dental) building *only*, as part of my office hours for the Dental College of Georgia.

Don't see what you need? Contact me with a request for a new instructional-design service/training.

Thanks and see you soon!

4. The instructions describe how to use the automated scheduling system.

Georgianna

Learn more about me at geolawsdesign.com.

5. Each main service or training offering is listed below for faculty clients to choose from.

I would like to schedule...

Faculty Services

FAC-SERV 1, Initial Meeting   (30 minutes)
Book this type of appointment to discuss your instructional-design needs with me. From here, we can determine what is the best way for me to help you and schedule any follow-up service or training sessions.

FAC-SERV 2, Work Session   (1 hour)
Book this type of appointment to work on needs we have previously discussed in an initial meeting. If you think we'll need more than an hour, you'll have the option to add on 30 or 60 more minutes as you complete the booking.

FAC-SERV 3, Set Up a D2L Course   (1 hour)

Figure 2: Book Now Page

The intake form allows the designer to ask the faculty member questions ahead of the meeting, such as:
- what a specific course, certificate, or program the meeting will be about (with that information, the designer can have a look at the respective academic produce before the meeting)
- what need the faculty has regarding that academic product
- what timeline is involved
- what the faculty member wishes to achieve by the end of the meeting (the clearer this part, the more likely the faculty and designer can meet that goal)
- where/how to meet (in a specific office or via video or phone conferencing)
- what document, if any, the designer needs to study ahead of the meeting, etc.

The post-service, custom thank-you email that this system automatically generates thanks the faculty member for his/her time and invites him/her to complete an anonymous 2-question survey describing what went well and what

the designer can do better. Many faculty have chosen to fill out this anonymous survey and provided the author and her leadership with valuable, rich feedback.

In the future, as the author's online continuing education, faculty-development courses open up to the faculty clients (to be delivered via the university's learning management system), registration for those courses will be handled via this scheduling system, using a personalized intake form.

4. Calendar
A plugin for a *calendar* allowed for events with design implications (an overlay of academic calendar, scheduled maintenance, training opportunities, webinars, etc.) to be made available in one consolidated place, thus saving faculty time otherwise spent going to various sources to get event dates relevant to their work. One of the main uses of the calendar page is to offer the latest details about the designer's office hours (which flex based on tasks that need to be completed against hard deadlines).

5. Contact
The *contact* page was expanded to include not only the designer's contact information, but also a map to her two offices, tips about parking, and tips on avoiding construction areas. This page also illustrates in which office the designer is located based on the day of the week.

6. Glossary
The *glossary* plugin brings the ability to list, explain, and exemplify terminology commonly used in instructional-design contexts. For instance, when the concept of a flipped classroom comes up in a conversation with a faculty member, the designer can point that faculty to the glossary entry on this topic. That glossary entry offers an overview and then further points out a web resource that offers detailed multimedia explanations of the concept.

7. Lending Library
The *lending library* lists titles faculty can borrow from the instructional designer's private library. The collection will evolve but, at the time this paper was written, 13 titles were available on topics related to eLearning, learner engagement, online course evaluation, instructional design, teaching, and technology.

8. News
The *news* plugin allows the author to announce *news* that interest faculty. Items listed on the news page may also appear on the calendar page, if day/time bound. For example, an announcement about Fair Use Week belongs on the news page, and specific events around Fair Use Week (e.g., a copyright workshop on Friday at 1 pm) belong on the calendar.

9. Portfolio
The *portfolio* tool shows finished products that may inspire faculty. The author could not find a plugin that allowed for a variety of media to be displayed in a carousel and opted for a temporary solution with limited capability. Eventually, the author replaced that tool with a portfolio powered by wix.com, which does not fit within the author's site frame, so it needs to be an external link (small price to pay considering the much more powerful capability of this tool).

10. Templates
The *templates* page offers faculty examples to follow, if desired. All these templates are free, of course, and fall under a 4.0 creative commons international license (i.e., attribution, non commercial, share alike). This page also offers forms that faculty can use when requesting sandbox courses, manipulations of courses (such as linking two sections into one shared course shell), and copying of content from previous semesters to upcoming semester shells.

11. Testimonials
A *testimonials* page allows faculty to share what they find most useful about their interaction with the instructional designer, in hopes to inspire their fellow colleagues to consider similar solutions for their courses, certificates, and programs.

Site Statistics

At the time of this publication, the following statistics characterized the site:

- 698 people had used the site and visited a total of 3416 pages.
- Traffic to the site is 100% through links (rather than search engine or direct URL input).
- 90% of the site's viewers were on a desktop and 10% on mobile devices.
- 40% of the site's viewers used Chrome, 38% used Firefox, and 11% used Safari.
- 48% of the users were accessing the site on devices running Windows, 42% on Mac, and 9% on Linux.
- The top three most visited areas are the *Book Now* page, the *About* page, and the *News* page.
- The top three most searches run on the site were for "student-student interaction" and "getting ready for an upcoming semester" and "course development plans".

Considerations

The solution presented in this paper raises several considerations:

1. Financial

The author started with the free wordpress.com tool but soon had to move to the paid wordpress.com for the ability to hand code and install plugins.

The author pays for her scheduling system and she will soon upgrade to the next price tier, allowing for the use of two calendars, one for each office the designer uses. This solves the issue of faculty from one geographical area of the campus booking appointments in the designer's office for the other geographical area of the campus. The use of two calendars (that Acuity Scheduling overlays as one) will make the designer's time more efficient, as she will be able to spend more time on task and less time commuting from one office to the other.

2. Access

Many university services are offered behind a password wall; the author wanted to address her faculty clients without barriers. Many distance-learning offices, instructional-design consulting firms, and centers for teaching and learning offer similar content freely to the general public. Although the content this author offers on her website is specific to her clients at Augusta University, it can also be accessed by the general public, in spirit of knowledge being a right, not a privilege.

3. Technical

The author had designed several websites from scratch in the past. However, this web design project pushed the limits of her technical knowledge, as she looked to use technology tools to meet specific communication, service, and training needs. Luckily, Wordpress has a robust community and there are many tutorials and FAQs available online.

The site is mobile friendly to begin with, and the simple addition of a menu repeated at the top of each page ensures that mobile-device viewers have the menu at their fingertips (the system collapses it and places it at the very end of the page).

Designing a website that grows as the service provider putting it together finds additional ways to serve her faculty clients is a little bit like playing chess; you have to think a couple of moves in advance and make sure you do not back yourself into a corner. The technology tools you choose to use today have to be flexible enough to grow and evolve tomorrow. In some cases that works, while in other cases that involves purchasing additional features for the existing tools (as is the case with the author's online scheduling system) or starting over with a new tool (as was the case with the author's portfolio).

4. Marketing

Taking on your own site means that you have to be in charge of your own image and marketing. At a minimum, you'll have to come up with my own custom graphics, logo, an overall site layout, look, and feel, etc.

5. Time

Being in charge of your own website also means that you are at once the employer and the employee, so to speak. It

is essential to not stop at being the "employer" and to allocate appropriate time to be the "employee". You'll need to take time for the upkeep and expansion of your site as you constantly strive to provide better service to your clients through the site.

6. Ethical/Legal

It goes without saying that anyone undertaking the task of putting together such as website moral and legal obligation to not to share private information under FERPA and HIPAA guidelines and to comply with ADA[iv] and copyright law.

Recommendations

For this solution to work for others, the following prerequisites need to be met:
- You have to have a need for creating such as site that cannot be met through other means.
- You need to obtain the necessary internal approvals from your leadership.
- You need to be willing to put the time and effort into this endeavor. You can start small and see if you can sustain the site; if you can, move forward with gradual expansion of the site.
- You need to have basic skills in:
    - technology
    - web design and HTML (there are many free online HTML tutorials)
    - graphic design (or use *Canva*, which requires no previous knowledge of graphic design)
    - writing
    - copyediting
    - closed captioning
    - working within the confines of ADA, copyright, FERPA, and HIPAA legislation.
- You will also need to have some basic tools:
    - free website authoring tool (*Google Sites*, *WordPress*, *Wix*, etc.)
    - free or paid domain name (*Go Daddy* is a cost-effective source for paid domain names)
    - server space (*Blue Host* works really well for *Worpress*)
    - any desired paid or free add-ons (such as Worpress plugins for a calendar, glossary, etc.)
    - graphic design software (the Adobe suite or alternatives such as the above-mentioned *Canva*)
    - media sources (start with *Wikimedia*, *Google Images* labeled for reuse, *Pixabay*, etc.)
- In some instances, a little bit of money from your own pocket is well spent. Decide where your limits are on using personal funds to improve the functionality of your website.

Conclusion

While a web solution is not for everyone (based on your specific needs, skills, time, and funds), it can be an effective way in communication with, supporting, and training your faculty clients. And what better way to assist distance-learning faculty than with a distance-learning solution.

Disclaimer

This paper offers the author's views based on personal experience. Any providers mentioned in this paper are simply the author's recommendation based on trial and error. The author is not paid for by these providers and is only affiliated with them as an end user.

Georgianna Laws, MEd is an instructional designer at Augusta University, 1120 15th Street (EC 1207B), Augusta, GA, 301912. Email: glaws@augusta.edu.

---

[i] For more information on the difference between wordpress.com and wordpress.org, please visit https://en.support.wordpress.com/com-vs-org/.

[ii] HIPAA stands for the *Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act* and protects patients' records.

[iii] FERPA stands for the *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act* and protects students' records.

[iv] ADA stands for the *Americans with Disabilities Act* and protects individuals with disabilities through provisions that have to do with equal access opportunities.