From the Editor

From Inkwells to an Electronic Learning Community

When I was taught handwriting in elementary school, the fountain pen was the prescribed writing instrument. All of the desks in the classroom had inkwells in the upper right-hand corners (favoring right-handers, of course). The ball point pen had just been introduced, making the whole writing process easier, cleaner, and certainly less prone to accidents. Nonetheless, we were forbidden to use the ballpoint pen in those early years. The teacher felt that it represented a passing fad and that if we learned to write with a fountain pen, it would equip us with skills for a lifetime. Though it is interesting that the fountain pen is now returning to the marketplace as the writing instrument for "sophisticated" and "discerning" people, the ballpoint has been the mainstay method for manually putting ink on paper for nearly 50 years. Once I was allowed to use the ball point for my school work, I was elated with how easy it was to use. I must admit, though, that I missed the requisite pauses afforded by refilling my fountain pen and attending to the other maintenance chores it required during the arduous writing tasks that I had to complete.

A similar situation occurred when calculators were introduced. Professors insisted that we learn how to operate a slide rule, since the calculators of the time were unwieldy desktop units and were too expensive for the average person to ever purchase. Knowing how to operate a slide rule was essential since they were not only low in cost, but they were portable as well. Mastering a slide rule would most certainly have life-long usefulness.

In the early 80s, microcomputers were just making their entre' into our lives. Investing in a computer system for our family seemed to be a rational and judicious decision, especially for the homework that our three children had ahead of them. I wondered, though, if my wife and I had made a purchasing mistake, for in these early years of the computer several of the teachers that taught our children forbade the use of a computer for doing homework assignments. I remember vividly how perplexed and distraught I was when I found that our son was doing his writing assignments with the word processing software that came with our computer, printing his work, and then transcribing it in hand writing to meet the teacher's requirements. Even though already mastered, doing more handwriting would most certainly elevate a person to a higher level of fulfillment over the course of a lifetime.

The current status of the World Wide Web is leading to situations that are analogous to these earlier examples. When my students first turned in writing assignments with sources cited that were exclusively from the Web, it alarmed me. My thoughts led me to feel that I needed to place some control on the extent to which I would allow my students to use the Web as a reference for their writings. When I honestly analyzed my feelings, though, I realized that I was a

bit jealous about how little time it took them to do background research for a paper they were writing compared to what I had to endure. I wanted them to use the library, just as I had been required to do. I guess it was sort of like the reasoning that football games are in a stadium, religious services are in a place of worship, and book research is done in a library. Even though I prided myself in embracing new technology and applying it, I had not really conceptualized the library beyond the bricks and mortar. I had thought of the Web and the physical library as useful, but somewhat dichotomous entities.

Just as the transition away from fountain pens, slide rules, and handwriting caused a change in behavior on our part, so does the use of the Web as a scholarly resource. In the conventional library there is a tradition of control from several different fronts over the quality and nature of the volumes available. Publishers make decisions on the books they produce so that they maintain their market and carry on the reputation of the company in terms of accuracy and quality. Libraries purchase materials that are consistent with the interests and needs of the communities they serve and reflect those communities' mores. Popular magazines generally apply editorial standards to what they publish to maintain credibility among their readership and nurture subscriptions. Scholarly journals, such as the JTE, maintain quality and focus through the refereeing process.

Alternatively, the Web is a totally uncontrolled storehouse of information. There are no restrictions to what is available. Though pornography on the Web is a popularly known problem, especially in educational circles, it goes far beyond that single issue. On the other hand, the Web is an awesomely wonderful resource. It is imperative that we not restrict students' use of Web references in an artificial or superficial manner. Rather, we must teach students to become wise and informed consumers of the information that is available to them in this era of decontrol. We must help them develop the new sense of responsibility that comes with the widespread availability of information. Though we have a long way to go before most of the information in the world is available electronically, it seems quite plausible that the day will arrive relatively soon.

One way to assess the validity of information and extend our knowledge is through discourse with one another as members of a learning community. The pervasiveness of the Web and email has enabled us to shrink the world even further and to make it more personal at the same time. Beginning with this issue, each author has the option of including an email address in the byline of the article. Though this is not a new practice among scholarly journals, it is agreeably not yet widespread. It assuredly offers to us a unique way of nurturing the members of our learning community. And most certainly, the skills that we teach to our students in using the Web and email will last them a lifetime…..

JEL