

The Odyssey Project is a recursive, learner-directed inquiry into emergent learning behaviors within an “ultra-rich environment” (Nelson, 1974). The project will provide a procognitive (Licklider, 1965), metacognitive (Bruner, 1997), bootstrapping (Engelbart, 1962) environment for an initial cohort of approximately forty (thirty UMW undergraduates, ten faculty), an environment that will empower them to be creators, architects, archivists, and publishers of their own digitally augmented learning. Participants will have their own Web domains, large amounts of online storage, and generous bandwidth. Working with largely open-source, Web 2.0 tools, learners will build personal learning habitats that will facilitate their learning and provide opportunities to document, store, and express its process and products. By using these tools and reflecting upon their uses, learners will also explore the recursive relations among organizing, documenting, archiving, and publishing. And because this learning environment will also be each learner’s personal digital creation, its design will express each person’s unique cognitive strategies, each person’s internalized image of what it means to learn.

Unlike e-portfolios, at every opportunity the Odyssey Project asks learners to engage with information architecture at the level of design, and thus at the level that will most effectively transfer to other contexts and platforms throughout their lives. Similarly, the Odyssey Project is more than just a collection of Web 2.0 tools directed to Facebook or aggregated in an RSS reader. Instead, it is an opportunity to prompt the creativity and deep understanding that come only with imagination, innovation, and dialogue located within a community of practice. Making and knowing thus become two aspects of one process, inspiring a new generation of learning “imagineers.”

The computerized part of this project consists of a robust, web-enabled development space for each participant, one basic enough that learners can get started right away, but extensible enough that very sophisticated structures can be built within it. The development space is based on a standard LAMP environment easily manipulated by means of a GUI front end such as cPanel. This space will also include a rich array of open-source scripts ranging from blogging platforms to wikis, discussion forums, audio/video/image galleries, and content management systems, and use Fantastico or the equivalent to enable point-and-click installation, upgrades, and deletions. The environment will also support manual installations.

UMW’s early efforts in such an environment have produced striking results and earned wide recognition. For example, author and developer Jon Udell, currently an evangelist for Microsoft, praised our efforts as examples of a “user innovation toolkit” ([http://www.infoworld.com/article/06/05/24/78521\\_22OPstrategic\\_1.html](http://www.infoworld.com/article/06/05/24/78521_22OPstrategic_1.html)). Jon has agreed to advise our project in a uniquely public manner by speaking to topics of mutual interest on his blog, <http://blog.jonudell.net>, thus raising the project’s profile as well as addressing multiple audiences inside and outside academia. Likewise, New Media Consortium VP Alan Levine praised UMW for “doing far and away a range of some of the best uses of web 2.0 technology for teaching and learning.” Our most ambitious current project is multi-user blogging both within and across specific courses (<http://www.umwblogs.org/>). These and other projects, in exactly the kind of “sandbox” environment we propose here, demonstrate that UMW has the core skills, experience, vision, and leadership the Odyssey Project needs. This proposal aims to take our successes, as well as lessons learned, and advance our efforts to the next level.

The Odyssey Project will be led by a group of Collaborators and Project Strategists chaired by Dr. Gardner Campbell, professor of English, former Assistant Vice-President for Teaching and Learning Technologies at UMW, and nationally-recognized thought leader in this area. Our Collaborators are a digital scholarship and repository expert from Australia and a University Librarian from a Canadian research university. Project Strategists will be recruited from leading faculty, staff, and student practitioners at UMW and other schools, as well as from corporate and non-profit institutions. As leaders, the Collaborators and Strategists will also be part of the learning community. Like the other project participants, they will be narrating the process of designing and building the environment in which they will be documenting, archiving, and publishing their own learning in this project. Their “metavoice” will be a primary means of publicizing the project and its progress.

Instruction will come primarily from three groups. Collaborators and Strategists will develop the initial curriculum, and Strategists will serve as a core set of instructors, especially during the Summer Institute. Distinguished Visiting Fellows will provide presentations, workshops, and informal colloquia, many of which will be open to the public. These Fellows—librarians, instructional designers, scholars, new media specialists, etc.—will be recruited largely from outside UMW, thus providing vital external perspectives on our work. We want to entice the very best Fellows into our project, so we have budgeted a relatively large amount for travel and honoraria. The third group will be the learners themselves, including sessions in which students teach faculty.

Phase One of the project (spring 2008) involves planning and recruitment. Near the end of this phase, we plan to add several project participants from incoming first-year students. Phase Two is an intensive four-week Summer Institute, bringing participants together in both real and virtual environments to study learning theory, information design, and Web 2.0 techniques of publication, linking, and social networking. This institute will combine the best features of a seminar, an independent study, a studio, and a research lab into a synergistic learning community. Phase Three will continue to put the summer learning into action as participants use their environments to shape, reflect on, and publish their learning during the regular academic year. UMW will sustain project activities, including the hosting environment, a schedule of speakers, conference travel, assessment, etc., through the 2008-2009 academic year.

Despite many prophecies, computers have not led us to fundamentally re-imagine the position of learners in relation to schooling. The Odyssey Project seeks to realize the potential of computers to transform education by using them to empower learners to imagine, store, examine, and share “the symbolic activities ... employed in constructing and in making sense not only of the world, but of themselves” (Bruner, 1990).