

## Surfing the web with the elderly An instructor's opinion

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December 9, 1998

Good evening, ladies and gentleman. I am Mauro Furin from the University of the Third Age in Vicenza, Italy. I cooperate with this institution as a teacher and a consultant too. I usually work as a system administrator and network designer. I have been teaching office automation and computing for some years. The task of teaching Internet actually is the most difficult I've found. I'm going to describe this, telling you about:

- some points our students usually worry about;
- some difficulties they encounter while learning;
- the structure of our courses.

Please don't blame me for not being precise when using technical terms. I'll deliberately say "Internet addresses" instead of "Uniform Resource Locators" to let everybody focus on the concepts I'll try to express.

It seems that, everyday, people get in touch with news regarding the Net, without really understanding the core topic. Newspapers, magazines and tv, especially Italian ones, use and (often) abuse technical words and "internet addresses", depicting science-fiction scenarios around common facts. When starting a course I am usually asked "how true that hacking, criminal and sexual stories, such as depicted by mass-media are", or whether "it is safe to give an Internet access as a present to a younger relative" or simply whether "it is so difficult as it seems". I think that an Internet basic knowledge should be widely spread and this is the reason why I support and applaud this UTA project. Our purpose in introducing the Net is ordering notions coming at random from mass-media. The elderly are often precise and attentive at this step. We illustrate a brief history of the Internet, depicting protocols as ways of getting a particular kind of service.

I often attract their attention using anecdotes like a story regarding a friend of mine, who received an e-mail message from an unknown university student from Milan, referring that during a dungeon-and-dragons multiplayer adventure he was advised to avoid entering an alley in a castle by the ghost of my friend, who had virtually died in that place months before, while playing the same game!

Or I describe how members of the Italian base in Antarctica remotely revised the timetable of the power generators to keep all instruments heated and running during a period of unmanned operations. I suppose this kind of story sounds a lot better than those that generated elderly's initial questions.

There are obviously some difficulties when using machines. Mastering a personal computer and its peripherals is the first step to access the web, unfortunately it is a small step for a video-game-greedy teenager, but generally speaking, a giant step for an Italian elder. Approaching a machine is quite frightening, because of the interactivity involved, the unpredictable state of the command interface and the apparently not constant response to the same input (many times you cannot give a precise operating sequence to obtain a particular action, without knowing how many windows are opened, which keys have been stroken and so on). This is often the beginner's point of view. So we start our courses just trying to put order in what is already known: technical words from commercials (RAM, hard disk size, processor type and speed, system clock), the difference between the concept of operating system, applications and data. Our goal is not a real knowledge of the topics - we

are not teaching in an engineering class - but mental order. Then there comes the first on-field approach- our old 8086 based computers are an invaluable aid in the process: the plain old dos interface is all we need to launch a base word processor such as WordStar. Here comes the transition between the Machine" and the Tool': the person in front of the screen perceives the black box as a mere tool for a precise purpose.. writing. At this point keyboard and keystrokes combinations confidence naturally comes. To be honest, this is enough for many people. Being capable of using the new medium with a precise purpose is enough satisfactory. Writing is quite a natural activity, that elderly particularly care about.

Then comes a new activity: surfing. We always pass through an off-line navigation step, using CD-ROMs and multimedia computers equipped with CD-ROM drives, audio speakers and a video projector (for the teacher's workstation). One of the main problems is always the mouse. It is incredible how much hated it is, when it generates unwanted movements. But hand and mouse pointer co ordination is the real problem. So learning to move in a limited virtual world such as a CD-ROM one is a good solution. By the way, it is another great goal achieved: being autonomous in discovering a CD-ROM is really like opening a window on a totally new world, I'm referring to the world of all current electronic publishing.

Back to school: it is now time to click on the browser icon. From a certain point of view, the whole path explained until now would not be necessary at all, seeing how easy using the browser is- a button bar, a mouse and a box to write Internet addresses in. But we are only at the beginning. The first thing to try is a list of resources, put together from addresses published by newspapers and soon. Immediately after this, the unavoidable question from someone in the classroom comes up: how can I find something I'm interested in?

The answer - learning to use search engines and lots of experience is quite difficult itself. I mean: even for a daily user it may be difficult to remember different syntaxes to use different search engines. Let's add to all this, our main handicap: language. It is a matter of fact that the main obstacle for Italian people accessing Internet is the weak knowledge of foreign languages, English first among others. Obviously there is no way of avoding this, and the situation will reasonably be the same for years. So we usually use Italian search engines, or Italian versions of well-known international ones, and this is enough, again, to say that our student should now have some tools to surf by themselves. However I think that a third age specialized multilingual web portal (you know, those websites listing interesting websites divided in categories, and offering some services online) may be a suitable solution. For instance, I explored with interest: <http://www.thirdage.com> Apart from some commercials in excess, it may be taken as a good paradigm.

Another good point may be found in discussion forums online, but it would be difficult, in my honest opinion, to keep translations synchronized to keep multilingual versions of the same forum, it would be better to have a common multilanguage entry point and many national forums. A supervisor may then decide which topics are worth the translation effort. We do not illustrate activities like file transferring using a file transfer protocol, because it is quite obvious that a person capable of downloading and installing a piece of software probably does not need to stay in our course at all. We still haven't said anything about newsgroups, what I had exposed is enough for a twenty-hours course, things can be rearranged for more intense activities in the future. Apart from the web, for instance, some students expressed their interest in image processing. This is someway related to that living repository that elderly are. Their memories are really a richness, and organizing them using a wordprocessor or a web authoring tool may be a good subject to go on teaching. So it may be interesting to improve our multimedia equipment with an image scanner, to let students acquire Images and implement a personal web page with their favourite pictures. Sharing them on the Internet, possibly with some feedback obtained via e-mail, may be the advanced subject for a future course.

I'm going to conclude summarizing what I had expressed: There is a myth built around the Internet by mass-media, which we want to destroy confidence using a personal computer is a difficult step to take our way to learn surfing passes through PC basic knowledge, wordprocessing, off-line navigation. On-line navigation is affected by language barriers and search engines syntax. We all have just started a wonderful experiment, at the beginning of the digital and computing era. I'm glad to be here and have the chance to hear about the other projects. I'd like to thank you for your attention and the ZAMW for inviting me to share my experience with you. If somebody has any question, please feel free to ask me.