

## Internet Self-Access: Hit or Myth?

By Tom Robb

The web overflows with material of potential benefit to our students, and if we don't find just the right material to match our syllabus, it is now relatively easy to generate our own activities from scratch.

Hot Potatoes <<http://www.half-baked.com>> is perhaps the most popular tool for authoring such activities. All we need to do is to provide the content, and it generates a suite of interactive activities such as crossword puzzles, drag and drop matching, etc. with it. We then simply upload the file to the web, tell our students the URL, and magically, learning takes place -- or does it?

These activities may indeed prove to be useful for teaching new vocabulary or reinforcing what we have taught in the classroom, but there here lies the rub: the students have to use it! Certainly, the self-motivated learner benefit tremendously from the material currently available, but for entire classes, their usefulness borders on the mythological.

New teachers soon learn that it is useless to assign homework unless the assignment is followed up in an ensuing class. Once students discover that the assignments are not going to be checked, they will

generally stop doing them.

Now what about activities on the Internet or on a CD-ROM? Can we assign activities as "homework" and really expect that the students will use them before our next class? Hardly.

The obvious conclusion is that we need to somehow know who has done the assignment, and perhaps how long they spent on it and how successful they were.

Ideally, we would only require students to use software (CD-ROMs or web pages) that provide a feedback mechanism for the teacher. The market, however, has little to offer us unless we are prepared to spend the money required for programs that do have a tracking feature, such as the DynEd programs, Ellis, Rosetta Stone, or the new web-based study programs such as GlobalEnglish or Longman's EnglishSuccess.

There are some alternatives, although they may require more work or vigilance on your part:

1. Have the students keep a record of what they have done, providing a chart with columns for "activity", "date", "time spent", "score" and "comments". If you ask them to show you their record

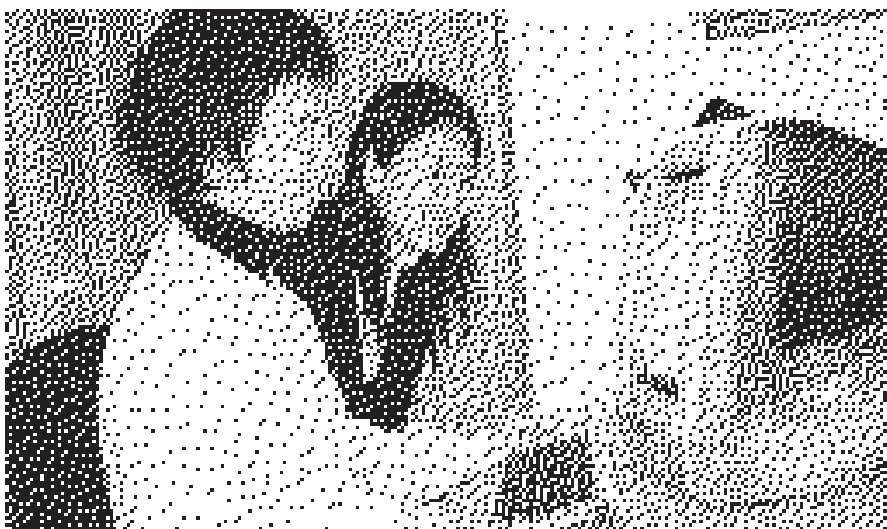
at frequent intervals, most (but not all) of the students will record their activity honestly.

2. Give regular quizzes on the content they were required to access. One simple way is to take a screenshot of the activity and make a cloze test of it. (See the box for info on how to do this.) Limiting the time to something that will allow those familiar with the activity to fill it in completely, but will not allow those who have never seen it before sufficient time to complete it.

3. Base a class activity on the outside activity, assuming that the students have done it. Those who haven't will not be able to participate.

Although I wasn't aware of it when this article was originally conceived, Hot Potatoes now has way of doing this -- for a fee. See <http://www.hotpotatoes.net> for further information. If you really want your students to benefit from your online activities, it might well be worth the charge.

Of course, you might reply that you don't have this kind of problem because your students use the activities in the computer lab during class time. You may disagree with the following opinion but I offer it anyway: It is an inefficient use of time for students to work on computer-based activities during a class session unless the activity itself requires the instructor's intervention. Web-based or CD-ROM-based activities are best used on the student's own time, when they can spend whatever amount of time they require on it, without having to conform to the pace of the class. This is, after all, one of the purported benefits of using computers in the first place.



## Screen Capture

### Windows:

*Slow way:* Hit the “Print Screen” key, then start “Paint” or another graphics program, and paste in the captured full screen. Then select the area you need, copy and then paste it into your word processor document.

*Easy way:* Try SnagIt  
<<http://www.techsmith.com/products/snagit/default.asp>>.

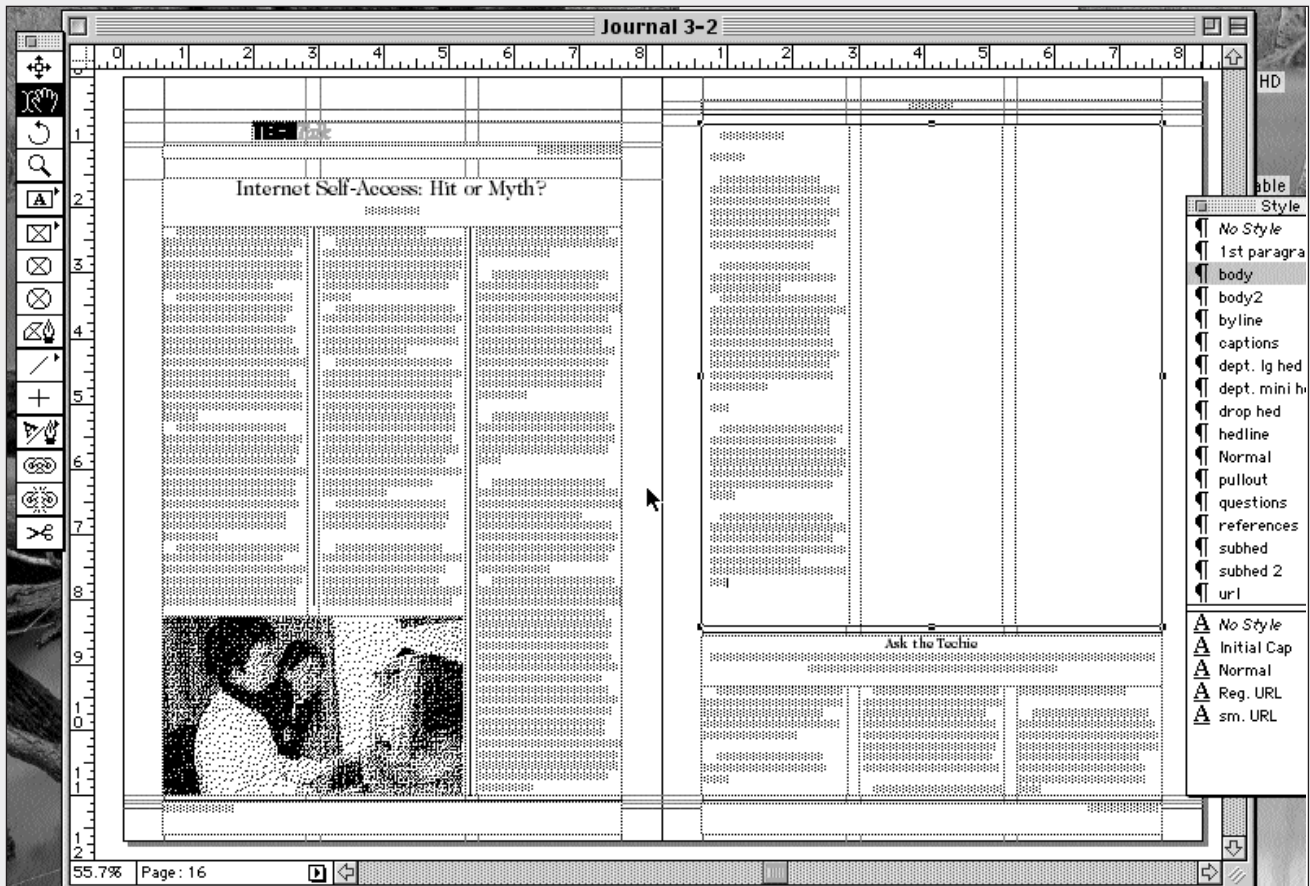
The product costs \$39.95 but can be used in evaluation mode for 30 days, after which all screen shots will be ‘branded’ with an overlay of the product name. It allows you to directly specify the area on the screen you wish to capture, increasing productivity immeasurably.

### Mac:

*Slow way:* Command+Shift+3

captures the entire screen into a PICT file which you will find inside your boot drive folder. Double click to open it. The rest of the process is similar to the WIN “slow way” above.

*Easy way:* The old stand-by “Flash-It” has disappeared from the major download sites. A similar product, Snapz Pro, is available for \$40, with a 15-day trial period.  
<<http://www.AmbrosiaSW.com/>>.



A screen capture of this edition of Tech Talk in progress done the slow way on a Macintosh.

## Ask the Techie

*This column is for you to ask your own questions about using computers and the Internet with your students. Send your questions to the editor, Tom Robb at [tom@robb.net](mailto:tom@robb.net)*

*Q - What's a 'blog'? And does it have any potential for FLT and FLL? (I seriously don't know except I'm thinking 'log' means a journal or something.)*

*A - Here's a quote from the Manchester Guardian, May 20, 2002:*

A blog, short for weblog, is hard to define, but easy to recognise. It is a form of personal online diary, which is usually set out in reverse chronological order - newest at the top - and which points [read: “can point”] you to other things on the net. <<http://media.guardian.co.uk>>.

The original site can be found at

<<http://www.blogger.com>>.

There are definite pedagogical implications here. Students could set up their own blog instead of the more usual “learner’s diary” or use it for “free writing.” The possible applications depend only on the creativity of the teacher and students.