

UW Promotes Women in Engineering

by Kirsten Gantenbein

The number of women employed in science and engineering industries is declining. Only 20 percent of professionals working in engineering fields in 2004 were women, according to the U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau. Foundations like the Anita Borg Institute for Women and Technology have made it their mission to increase the positive impact of women on engineering and technology.

"I was shocked, I had no idea it was that bad," says Anna Parsons, referring to the first time she learned about the declining number of women professionals in the field of engineering and science. Parsons is a Technical Communication senior and an undergraduate teaching assistant for a pre-engineering course, Engineering (ENGR) 100H. ENGR 100H is partnered with the Virtual Development Center (VDC), a program sponsored by the Anita Borg Institute.

Since 1999, the VDC has held an annual conference to showcase student projects and host interactive workshops. This year, Parsons attended the VDC conference as the representative for the University of Washington, which was held in Boulder, Colorado.

Parsons says she was inspired by the conference proceedings and the communication lessons she learned there. When explaining how the VDC has impacted her and her students, she describes it as "life-changing because it makes you want to do something different and work hard for it."

A Unique Introduction to Engineering

by Kirsten Gantenbein

As another spring quarter winds down, freshmen in an introductory engineering course are busy putting the finishing touches on their projects. But unlike their peers, who are busy typing away on computers and laptops, these students are meeting with project mentors over coffee at the Microsoft campus to get advice on their latest progress.

These students are enrolled in the honors section of Engineering (ENGR) 100, taught by Karen Kasonic of the Department of Technical Communication. The course is part of the Virtual Development Center (VDC) network run by the Anita Borg Institute, whose goals are to promote engineering enrollment to women and minorities.

The class consists of a diverse group of pre-engineering students, mostly freshmen men and women, who are assigned to two teams. As students construct Web sites and multimedia materials to meet their client's goals, professionals from Microsoft act as mentors to the teams and review their weekly progress.

The difference lies in the close interaction the students have with engineers and software designers from Microsoft. "The students are so astonished that these professionals have taken interest in them...there's something about working with

a professional that really makes the students feel special," says Kasonic.

The mentorship with ENGR 100 benefits Microsoft as well, as the company is trying to help move more women into the field, which is similar to the goals of the VDC. Kasonic notes that these mentors are supportive and actively give workshops, presentations, and tours of the Microsoft campus. "It's not common in the industry to have such a one-on-one interaction between professionals and students," says Kasonic. Her goal is to develop this course to serve as a model to help companies reach out to young technology students and help engineering recruitment at other universities.

With this course, students build professional relationships and social skills outside of the classroom. The course also gives exposure to the field of technical communication, which is highly beneficial to the department.

Kasonic introduces to young engineering freshmen that they have all the capabilities to work with a team, solve professional problems, and produce a project, and that it can be exciting. Kasonic wants to leave these students with a sense of accomplishment, "The point was that they could all do it, no matter what."



Business Japanese Online Pilot Course Successfully Launched

by Daniel Smiley

The Department of Technical Communication's Technical Japanese Program (TJP) launched its new Business Japanese Online (BJO) pilot course last fall and is off to a successful start. This truly innovative distance learning program is taught entirely over the internet and focuses on Japanese business communication training using cutting edge software tools developed by TJP. "I believe our first year was very successful, especially as a pilot program," says Masashi Kato, Senior Lecturer and Associate Director of the TJP, and also project lead. "Since a program like this has never been offered before, we needed to see what actually works and what doesn't... and as a whole I feel it functioned extremely well," he said.

Kato believes the key factor that made the program succeed was being able to effectively integrate its software tools, particularly its Conversation Partner (CP) program, into the online curriculum to enhance student learning. Developed by TJP computer specialist Joe Kim, CP enables students to have face-to-face interaction over the internet in real time using a Web cam and headset. Students meet in an online virtual classroom,

practice model dialogues, and role play together. CP allowed students to engage in truly interactive communication with each other, something that was not possible in other distance-learning language courses in the past.

Five to eight students enrolled in the course each quarter, which is taught by TJP lecturer Miyako Imai McDavid. Enrollment was evenly split between college students and professionals who live not only in the Seattle area but also out of state including Kentucky and even Japan. The advantage of an online course like BJO is the flexibility of being able to take it anywhere, any time. "Being that I was a full time engineer, I didn't have time to take classes at the local university. Even if I had, I would have been forced to drop at some point due to all of the moves that I have made in the past year. BJO allowed me to make career moves while still making progress towards my [learning] goal," said Lamar Small, who enrolled in BJO all three quarters.

Many of the professional students like Small use Japanese for their work and have commented on how valuable the program has been for them. Both Kato and Imai McDavid agree that BJO is

most effective when the student's needs matches with the program expectations, specifically if they currently work in a Japanese business environment or if they plan to do so in the future. "Because our program has a rather structured schedule for an online course, students need to have clear goals of why they want to take the course and be an independent, motivated learner in order to succeed," explains Imai McDavid.

Because many universities do not provide Japanese language courses above the third year level, Kato believes the current BJO program will continue to have its own niche among students. While the current BJO program will be offered again next year, TJP is also planning to create an "Executive Program" in the near future that specifically targets busy professionals and effectively caters to their needs with a much more flexible schedule.

According to Kato, "The demand for foreign language training is still very high but many places do not have the human resources to provide such services. BJO is a powerful tool unlike any other in the past that meets the needs of these people anywhere in the world."

Boyd and Rose Win Webby Award

by Ann Wong

With 175,000 unique votes in the course of 30 days, Suzanne Boyd and Emma Rose were chosen as the People's Voice Award for Insurance Category Winners from the Webby Awards for redesigning the Washington State Department of Labor & Industries Web site. Boyd and Rose's site was one of five sites nominated by the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences to be considered for a Webby Award

and a People's Voice award. While the Academy ultimately rewards the Webby, the People's Voice is up to the audience, which says a lot about the Web site. "It's positive feedback," Boyd and Rose agree, "hopefully, it means that we've done our job well."

During Boyd and Rose's Web site redesign, they researched their users and conducted usability tests to compile user feedback during each step of the

process. "This approach focused on users' needs and helped us create a Web site that would work for them." In the end, the people spoke; Boyd and Rose successfully made a user-friendly site by following Dr. Ginny Redish's definition, "It provides value that users can see themselves."

For more information about the Webby Awards, go to <http://www.webbyawards.com>.