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Edward C. Jensen College of Forestry, Oregon State University, Corvallis

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Jensen: Tree of the month learning experience

TREE OF THE MONTH: A MENTORED, WEB-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Edward C. Jensen

Associate Professor of Forest Biology, College of Forestry, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331. jensene@ccmail.orst.edu

ABSTRACT: In Fall 1996 the College of Forestry at Oregon State University conducted a student-led retreat to discuss the need for mentoring in the university environment. It was attended by undergraduate and graduate students, by faculty and staff, and by a few members of the local professional community. We discussed what mentoring is (different things to different people), who needs it (we all do, but in differing amounts), who can provide it (we all can, but in different situations), and what college administrators can do to foster it (fund it!). The key idea that I took away from the retreat is that what mentoring needs most to succeed is personal commitment. Commitment on the part of those who want to be mentored and commitment on the part of those willing to serve as mentors. The rest is details.

227

University Education in Natural Resources

Soon after returning to my office, I decided to merge my desire to mentor undergraduate students with my desire to produce teaching materials about trees. I contacted a few students who I thought might be interested in a mentoring relationship, shared a few thoughts about what I had to offer and what I'd like to receive in return, and waited to see what would happen. Since the project I had in mind was dendrologically-based, I contacted students who had already proven themselves in my dendrology class.

The concept was to produce a Web site focused on trees that would be attractive to the widest possible array of audiences—young and old, at home and in classrooms, professional and lay audiences. It was to be image rich, evoke emotion as well as understanding, and be changeable rather than static. I wanted people to be able to visit the site time and again, without having to develop the entire project "up-front." I wanted the project to allow the student protÄgÄ to flex their creativity as well as their knowledge.

I'm not a Web expert—in fact, I hardly use it myself. So the student I chose needed to have Web skills, or be able to develop them on their own. They needed to be knowledgeable about trees and able to find information that they did not know. Accuracy and attention to detail was key, because the site created would be a reflection on me, as well as on them. They needed to be able to write clearly, concisely, and effectively, in an interpretive vein. Essentially, I gave them access to my slide files and my time, and then stood back, intervening as little as possible but as often as needed. The result is the "Tree of the Month" project that I'd like to share with you today.

Several lessons were learned from the production of this Web site:

- *Bright students have an amazing affinity to produce Web sites, even if their knowledge in the beginning is limited.
- *Good Web sites take a lot of time and effort to produce.
- *Mentored projects can play an important role in extending knowledge from one group to another.
- *Mentored projects can have professional benefits to the mentor, as well as to the protege.
- *Mentoring is good for the soul.

1998