

# ***thinkubator.sfu.ca* – an online hub for the publishing community**

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## **Overview**

*Thinkubator* is the name of a proposed online service, hosted by the Canadian Centre for Studies in Publishing that would bring together students, researchers, and industry in an ongoing dialogue. *Thinkubator* would be designed, managed, and run by the CCSP—its faculty and its students—further establishing the CCSP’s role in educating, researching, and disseminating information about the Canadian publishing industry. This document outlines a plan for *Thinkubator* and how it would operate.

## **Background**

During the *Web Publishing Workshop* in 2000, we ran a project scenario that involved creating a web site for the web publishing workshop and its alumni. This scenario resulted in the *Thinkubator* prototype, which you may have seen (<http://24.113.114.188/SFU/>). *Thinkubator* was an audience-driven, news-oriented site aimed at workshop students and alumni.

While last summer’s scenario project and its resulting prototype provoked some interest and discussion at the time, the project was too broadly defined and vague in its scope and goals. We’d like at this time to return to the kernel of this idea and re-frame it as a real project.

Currently, the Canadian Centre for Studies in Publishing (CCSP) and its educational arms—the MPub program and the summer publishing workshops—do an exceptional job of bringing representatives from the publishing industry (both local and national) in to the courses and educational experiences of students. However, outside of specific classroom interaction and student internships, these relationships have little opportunity to develop over time.

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In a similar sense, the CCSP's new media and web publishing programs provide sophisticated, high-level analysis of industry trends and method—again well-connected to industry representatives. But beyond the actual curriculum content, little is done to practice what we preach. The APuRL project is a notable exception, but the CCSP in general is not as well represented online as its educational offerings might suggest.

We would like to present the *Thinkubator* project as a targeted response to these issues. We'd like to take up the *Thinkubator* concept and focus it more on the ongoing needs and activities of CCSP programs.

## Goals and Requirements

*Thinkubator* is a user-driven web presence with two principal aims:

- to establish a community-oriented online forum for discussion and exploration of issues in publishing between our industry friends and partners, CCSP faculty and staff, and publishing students
- to provide a learning resource for SFU publishing students in the form of an active, ongoing web publishing project.

The site would be, in essence, an *extranet* for the people who revolve around the CCSP: students, alumni, faculty, and industry—an extension of the campus and its programs, both spatially and temporally.

### *Audiences*

The audience for this site would be, in rough terms, all of the people who are associated with the CCSP's programs over the course of a year. This large group of people can be broken down into specific categories that give a more detailed picture of who this site is for. In rough order of priority, these are:

1. Current MPub students
2. Current Summer Workshops students
3. Industry people, especially those who we bring in as guests and faculty in the MPub and Summer Workshops, and the CCSP advisory board.
4. Core MPub faculty and staff
5. MPub and Workshops alumni
6. Potential students
7. The Canadian publishing industry in general

Of course, there is significant overlap among these groups. What is important is the ongoing give-and-take between people who are at any one time “inside” the CCSP (as students, as faculty, as guests) and those who are “out there” in the industry. What *Thinkubator* aims to do is to nurture this relationship, to the benefit both of the industry in general and the CCSP.

### ***Key objectives***

The following are what we see as *Thinkubator*'s four main objectives:

1. To provide an ongoing discussion forum for the presentation and discussion of news, information, resources, and opinions. This forum would involve all participants of the site: students, industry people, faculty, and staff.
2. To provide a central source for CCSP course and program information, resources, and references. Faculty could use the site as a web-based adjunct to classrooms and offline materials. This would have the added effect of making the activities of the CCSP visible to the outside world, specifically for our industry friends and partners. It would also constitute an archive of the discourse around the CCSP's programs.
3. To establish a primary point of contact for CCSP students and faculty for announcements, news, and communication between students and alumni. As such, it could act as an adjunct to, if not a replacement for, the mailing lists currently used.
4. To establish an in-house webserver for MPub projects and project work. Since the site would be housed on our own server and administered “in-house,” we could open up the business of operating and maintaining such a service to MPub students. In a sense, it would be a working laboratory for online publishing.

This sort of infrastructure support looks more and more essential as SFU continues to pursue web-oriented curriculum, first as a valuable hands-on resource for projects and experimentation, but also as a practical move toward “distributing” the learning environment and providing more flexibility for student access and interaction.

### ***The publishing community in Vancouver and beyond***

The CCSP enjoys great relationships with the publishing industry. Much of what makes the CCSP's courses so successful is the active participation of such a wide range of people from the publishing world—people who are keen supporters of the CCSP's work. *Thinkubator* would provide a means to keep that interaction going over time, which would both enrich students' experiences and solidify the CCSP's role in the community.

This is especially true in the sense that the CCSP draws students from the publishing industry and sends those students back out again to become leaders in that community. *Thinkubator* could play a central role in this “lifecycle,” embodying the evolving relationships between industry and academia.

### ***Editorial strategy***

The main content of the *Thinkubator* site would be discussion surrounding articles and news items posted to the site. The basic structure for this follows the now-popular “web-log” format established by community-driven sites like <http://slashdot.org>. In this model, threaded discussions are attached to articles (which can consist of plain text and/or attached files). New articles can be submitted by anyone, but must be approved by an editor or moderator before appearing “live” on the site. So the basic site structure is a collection of articles, each with a discussion forum attached.

*Thinkubator* would thrive only if articles are posted and discussion follows. We see two main sources for new articles to stimulate discussion. The first is the CCSP’s connection to people in the publishing industry, who would be invited to submit articles on particular issues; the relationship could be handled in a similar way to how guest lectures are arranged currently. So, for instance, people like Paul Sullivan, Kathryn Grafton, Dean Allen, or Robert Ouimet would be asked to contribute opinions, news, or analysis leading to discussion on the site.

Second, topics, themes, and resources that come up in MPub and Summer Workshop courses would provide a substantial amount of timely content within CCSP courses. Hopefully, faculty would use *Thinkubator* as a place to extend classroom discussion and exploration. In this way, *Thinkubator* would become a core part of studying publishing at SFU, as well as staying current with the publishing industry.

While the content of the site would be largely community-controlled, there will have to be an editor or editors who manage the site and its content. These roles can be filled by faculty and/or students, or by inviting industry guests to act as editor for a particular period.

### ***Curriculum integration***

*Thinkubator* would provide a “real” project for exploring online publishing for MPub students. Such a project would involve all aspects of online publishing scenarios: planning, management, resourcing, production, design, and maintenance, as well as allowing us to easily work with higher-level topics like database-driven publishing, content-management systems, managing online communities, and experimenting with ways of bringing content and audience together with new media—not as hypotheticals or scenarios, but as the real business of keeping *Thinkubator* running.

A dedicated server housed and administered within the CCSP would provide the necessary technical infrastructure for carrying sophisticated web projects or scenarios without having to either rely on external contractors to “finish” projects or concoct imaginary scenarios to provide context for limited student work. Students can learn to work end-to-end on web projects, either directly within the context of the *Thinkubator* community or alongside it. This would provide students with a much more direct set of skills and experiences than we are currently able. Such a system would also provide a platform we can work with and keep current from term to term and year to year. Each new intake of students would inherit what had been developed before, and would be in a position to make decisions about what to throw away and what to keep and continue developing, in an ongoing process.

## **Project Details**

### *Platform and architecture*

Currently, MPub access to web publishing resources is fairly limited. While we ask students to work hands-on at creating “web pages,” the ability to actually publish these is limited to hosting from individual SFU student accounts. As well, the Harbour Centre webserver is no longer administered locally. Summer publishing students have a little better access, with dedicated servers brought in each year, but this is a very time-limited setup. Effectively, practical student experience is limited to the “brochure-ware” paradigm that we’ve actually been pooh-poohing in classes; we have no ability to work hands on with dynamic sites, information management systems, or any of the sort of larger, more complex environments that are the meat and potatoes of real-world online publishing.

Setting up and administering a web server is not as involved as it once was. An inexpensive PC running Linux, Zope, and other open-source software will afford us all the flexibility we need without requiring much in the way of money or expertise. We have the skills to do this within the faculty already. Using Zope as a development platform gives us enormous flexibility, thanks to this software’s openness and nicely linear learning curve. Technical administrative needs can be kept to an absolute minimum, unless we specifically decide to open up such realms for a specific pedagogical purpose. Almost “out-of-the-box,” Zope gives us all the functionality discussed above, is simple to administer, and easy to extend if we decide to later (an example might be to integrate the Citation database). This approach speaks to the democratization of access that is also apparent in the APuRL project.

## *Operations and maintenance*

The Thinkubator can be created very inexpensively, drawing on cheap hardware, open source software, and in-house know-how. This does not have to be a complicated endeavour with large costs. Here is a preliminary project budget for design and building:

Server hardware	\$1000.00
Back-end install and configuration	\$2500.00
Front-end design and production	\$2500.00
Initial content creation/procurement/editorial	\$1500.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$7500.00</b>

Some assumptions:

- Project design and functionality are roughly similar in scope to the scenario prototype from the 2000 workshop
- SFU ACS staff would arrange a permanent Internet connection and SFU domain address
- Ongoing content acquisition/guest honoraria would come out of existing guest budgets or require separate funding

Ongoing operations are more difficult to predict; at base, an hour or so per week for basic administration would be required; this would perhaps need more attention during the summer workshops, depending on the number of workshops participating online. Editorial tasks would require perhaps a half-day per week while class is in session, although within the MPub program, an idea might be to apprentice students if there is interest in that direction, and as such the administration of the server could be thought of as part of the PUB607 course, or perhaps covered by an RA position.

### **Summary: small investment, big value**

What we're proposing here is simple, inexpensive, and entirely accomplishable right now. Having such a system run within the CCSP would offer value to students on many levels: as an extension of the classroom, for access to class resources, as an ongoing discussion forum, as a point of contact between members of the publishing community, as a flexible platform for providing higher-level web publishing experience, and as a "sandbox" environment for experimentation. It may well become a significant contributing factor in the evolution of the publishing education we offer at SFU.