

Why Teach DOS?

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One of the difficulties in teaching the command line interface to students is the esoteric nature of operating systems. Although students find the material interesting, the question I repeatedly hear is “What good is DOS? It doesn’t do anything.” This is particularly true now that the world has moved to the graphical user interface.

It is difficult to convince students with no computer experience that they need the knowledge that DOS provides. DOS is indeed “dead” as a stand-

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mand line interface rather than the graphical user interface.

Using the MS-DOS window in Windows 95 and Windows 98 also eliminates lab problems in trying to maintain separate DOS and Windows 95/98 operating systems environments. And it solves the problems of students working on their own computers who typically have

Windows 95 / 98 systems.

Setting up computer systems, optimizing performance,

and troubleshooting require students to have good command line skills. To this end, students should learn about creating a startup disk and

about the AUTOEXEC.BAT and CONFIG.SYS configuration files. Driver files, real mode, protected mode, and different types of memory are important components of this discussion.

The command line prompt exists in Windows 95, Windows 98, Windows NT 4.0, Windows NT 5.0, and Novell, and batch files are useful in all these operating systems. Batch file skills are critical in the networking world of Novell and NT as well as for the stand-alone computer system.

In addition, many students have a gap in their knowledge base of networks. Students often take a Windows and/or DOS class and—if they are on a networking career path—jump into a large-systems networking class. This can be an

intimidating jump. There are many students who work in small offices that do not have network administrators. Others may work in environments where they only need to access a network or share files, folders, and devices on their own systems at home. These students are not going to follow the networking program. Still, all these students need to understand basic networking concepts, how to set up a peer-to-peer network, how to share files, folders, and devices, and general network techniques, such as mapping drives.

In addition to these considerations, students need at least

a basic understanding of TCP/IP concepts because, when using the Internet, so many students are lost at the first mention of such terms as protocol and IP address.

Understanding the command line interface will help students develop a better comprehension of online activities such as FTP. In addition, students need at least a rudimentary understanding of certain troubleshooting commands such as ping.

A much too neglected topic—backing up a computer system, including the registry—is best covered in a discussion of DOS. Students should learn

the purpose and function of the registry as well as what files make up the registry. They should learn how to restore the registry in both Windows 95 and Windows 98 and about the new tools in Windows 98 such as ScanReg. They should learn the structure of the registry, how files and the registry interact, and when and how to do simple tasks using RegEdit.

For all these reasons, it's important for students to understand the command line interface and when and why they would use it instead of the graphical user interface of Windows 95/98—that's why DOS lives!