Blogs as an Alternative to Course Management Systems, Then and Now

My contribution to the collection was "Blogs as An Alternative to Course Management Systems: Public Interactive Teaching with a Round Peg in a Square Hole." As I think the title suggests, I think sometimes using the wrong tool is a legitimate way to work around some sort of technical or other problem. In my case, that was the idea of using Wordpress as a learning or course management tool instead of an institutional CMS like Blackboard, or, in the case of EMU, eCollege.

My chapter had four sections. The first, "What's wrong with course management systems," was about just that, and one of the key problems I discussed was the limits of a CMS being behind a firewall. For me, this rarefies the notion that education is a private one-to-one exchange between a student and a teacher rather than what I think we all believe, that education is a communal and social experience. I also wrote about emphasizing education as a *public* experience, one where folks from outside of the class are welcomed.

The next section, "Leaving the CMS and going to wordpress" is about some of the key questions/concerns anyone needs to have answered if they are going to use wordpress (or a similar software) to avoid an institutional CMS: "Will my institutional allow me to do this? Is there an official policy and/or unofficial understanding?"; "How am I going to handle grading and copyright-protected material?"; "Which version of wordpress to use" (that is wordpress.com wordpress.org)?; and "Am I willing to take on the responsibility of moving away from the institutional CMS?" This section wasn't so much a "how to" as it was meant to be more or less a heuristic for readers contemplating this kind of shift.

The next part, "What is right about wordpress?" is about some of the functional strengths of wordpress over a CMS like eCollege or Blackboard in terms of usability for both students and

teachers, but it's also about the advantages of the public space of an online course via wordpress. I share three anecdotes about this "openness" from two different completely online graduate courses I taught with wordpress. The first was a rhetorical theory class in fall 2009. We were discussing the classic "rhetorical situation" debate back in the late 60s/early 70s between Lloyd Bitzer and Richard Vatz when I received an email from Vatz. He commented favorably on the class discussion with me and he recommended other readings. As I write in the chapter, my students and I were simultaneously pleased and a little freaked out by this experience.

The second two examples of class openness/publicness were the following term in 2010. This was also an all online graduate course, one on writing pedagogy and technology, and I assigned several essays from the then in-press collection by Cheryl Ball and James Kalmbach *Reading and Writing New Media.* Early in the term, we read Ames Hawkins' "Manifesting New Media Writerly Process," which (as a manifesto) is a provocative and challenging piece. One of the students wrote a particularly dismissive post about Hawkins' piece. Several students responded and then the site was visited by Hawkins herself, who (gently) took the student to task, concluding her comment with "Betcha didn't actually think you'd get a response, eh? Isn't this the point of the digital world?"

When students realized that Hawkins was "present," the online conversation simultaneously took on a tremendous energy (the discussion was one of the most active of the semester in terms of number of posts and details of response), and it became more careful and respectful. Seeing a "teachable moment," I posted,

"I don't think that Ames or any of the other writers we're going to read this term will mind constructive criticism. If you disagree with her, go ahead. But here's the thing: you've got to have respect for the texts and the authors, and you have to engage thoughtfully. Sure, you

should do that because authors like Hawkins might be reading; but I'd say the same thing about entering into a dialog with Plato or [Walter] Ong or whoever."

Following that exchange, we had a discussion of Michael Salvo's essay in that collection, "Cinders, Ash, and Commitment: Database Pathos in Six (Million) Parts," which is an interesting autobiographical take on the databases available at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. I think my students took a lot more care and respect in discussing this piece knowing that Michael was there quote-unquote listening, and I think that also was carried through with other discussions of readings for writers both present and absent.

This leads to my last section, "Concluding with a caveat for some privacy," where I pull back a little bit on the openness question. I had an email exchange with Michael about his experience in class, and he hinted at the downside of openness. Michael wrote: "Through your class site, I had immediate and useful audience response, and perhaps due to its content, had some very strong responses. Yet few students really engaged me with its content: they were either congratulatory or quiet, although I don't know what other backchannel discussion was happening. "

In other words, while Salvo was happy with the interaction and response from my students, he was not entirely sure it was as honest or forthcoming as it could have been.

I want to close by talking about two "what's changed/where are they now" category of things. In the case of my experience, not a whole lot has changed regarding my preference for wordpress as a CMS over my institution's current CMS, eCollege-- though there has been many rumors that this will change. I still have the flexibility to use wordpress and I've experimented with teaching classes with wordpress.com as the central class discussion space, and that's worked reasonably well.

I think the big change for both my students and myself is a different appreciation and sensibility regarding privacy and "openness" in online classes. I still think education should be a public experience and I think the advantages of having authors like Hawkins and Salvo join the conversation as we discuss their work outweighs the disadvantages of a potentially less honest discussion. And for classes I teach like "Writing for the World Wide Web," I do leave the website completely open because I think that's part of the nature of the class: writing for the web is inherently public. But as both my students and I have become more savvy about our privacy online and about the extent to which all of our identities are being mined and monetized, I've pulled back quite a bit on the inherent value of the public class. I still use wordpress, but now I also frequently use a password protected installation of wordpress.

The second issue I want to touch on just briefly-- I'm guessing we'll be talking about this more in our discussion-- is the dilemma of web publishing versus print for this kind of scholarship. One of the reasons we put this panel together is because the three or so year lag in the publishing process meant a lot of this book is now out of date. On the one hand, perhaps an electronically published version of this book might have shortened the editorial process and the essays would have been more relevant and useful when the book originally appeared. On the other hand, it is here-- I can hold it up, see!-- and the same is not true of a lot of electronically published scholarship. I was looking through an article I published electronically about 10 years ago just the other day and I would estimate that about 80% of the other sites I cite and link to in that piece have rotted away. I had an article published in the first version of the *CCC Online* that was unceremoniously disappeared when someone at NCTE decided to just turn off the server space. And as I type this on the Wednesday before the conference, one of the primary journals in our corner of the discipline, *Kairos,* does not work and it would appear to have had problems

for the last couple of weeks. (Though I'm happy to report at least a temporary version of the site

is back online).