One Course, One Web Site— of Course? Maybe Not!

Each course has historically had a Web site to itself—but why not leverage the content among courses by sharing sites?

By **Ellen R. Cohn**

Colleges and universities increasingly employ commercial Web-based course management systems (such as Blackboard and WebCT). How is it, then, that these institutions unquestioningly allocate a unique Web site to each class? Why establish one Web site for one course when other options provide so many benefits? Why isn't there a clamor for information systems that can accommodate multiple purposes and audiences and provide life-long continuity throughout the many phases of our educational, professional, and personal pursuits?

Single-Course Web Sites

Single-course Web sites support traditional academic protocols, wherein institutions assign specific dates, physical classroom space, times, and participants (students and faculty) to each "class." Indeed, it is oft observed that Web site architecture resembles human use of architecture and space.

Cultural norms influence educational practices in various ways. For example, current course-scheduling conventions (a student's enrollment in one course per time slot) mirror Western culture's expectation of *monochronism*, the practice of doing one thing at one time, versus *polychronism*, the performance of several activities at once. Additionally, culturally dictated expectations of power and authority require students to direct their gaze and attention toward the faculty member, leading to the development of faculty-centric classroom con-

figurations. Faculty members, not students, typically set learning objectives and outcomes, assess learning, and assign grades. Given the strength of these cultural practices, it is not surprising that one faculty-led class uses one Web site for a finite time period.

Much like the performance of a live play, the actors (students) and director (faculty member) empty the academic theater at the conclusion of the performance (course). Faculty often can retain access to their course Web sites for future "productions." However, upon separation from the privileges of course membership, students (who rarely re-enroll in or revisit a class they have satisfactorily completed) typically lose access to a restricted course Web site. For many students, the single-course Web site largely represents "disposable" knowledge—disappearing shortly after they sell their course textbooks.

Despite powerful cultural influencers, academic culture is not static. The earliest U.S. classrooms incorporated many levels of students in the "one-room school," taught by one teacher. A variant of this practice was later reintroduced in the "open classrooms" of the 1970s. Other culturally induced educational changes include shifts toward more active and cooperative learning, peer instruction, classroom assessment, and placing students into the community through service learning. Distance education and Web-based pedagogy represent dramatic departures from the isolated one-room school, pulling together students and faculty from potentially widely distributed locations. A burgeoning recent trend is for students to generate electronic portfolios to demonstrate their learning and competencies, particularly in the field of education.

Multi-Purpose Web Sites

Next, let us envision multi-purpose Web sites that move beyond the concept of "one course, one classroom, one time

slot." There are several scenarios for which instructors may employ one Web site for two or more distinct cohorts:

■ One Web site, successive courses
■ Two instructors, two classes, one course
■ Master instructor, consortium-based courses
■ One Web site, demographically diverse student cohorts
■ Student-stakeholder/mentor interactions
■ Student-alumni interactions
■ Interdisciplinary learning opportunities

One Web site, successive courses. Faculty members frequently lament that students fail to make connections between introductory and more advanced courses. These challenges become even more acute when different faculty members teach successive courses (such as Chemistry I and Chemistry II), yet lack adequate exposure to each others' course content, assignments, and student learning outcomes. The use of one Web site for two or more successive courses would serve as a visible declaration that an academic course does not stand alone within a curriculum and that students need to both retain and expand their mastery of the earlier content.

A shared Web site can also help faculty members better appreciate the content of courses other than their own and lead to a more integrated and efficient curriculum. In this scenario, student groups spanning multiple cohorts could engage in peer modeling, peer review of assignments, and joint projects. Such activities could yield enhanced learning for both new and advanced students.

Two instructors, two classes, one course. Two instructors at geographically distant institutions, each with a distinct class cohort, could join forces using videoconferencing and a common Web site. This would be especially valuable if each instructor brought unique content expertise to the course.

Master instructor, consortium-based courses. In one consortium-based higher education model, students gain entry to and identify their degrees with one college, university, or educational consortium. These students will attend interactive videoconferencing or Internet television courses taught by nationally recognized "master teachers" whose efforts are supported by local teaching assistants. Consortium-sponsored Web sites will unite students throughout the country, as well as facilitate student linkages to their local recitation sections and "home" institutions.

Demographically diverse student cohorts. The sharing of a single Web site allows students to interact with a cohort from another state or country, or with individuals of different ethnicity, gender, age, and so forth. A common Web site could increase students' exposure to elements of diversity that might not be intrinsic to their home academic institutions. This scenario, applied to two classes learning each other's native languages, could provide both cohorts with Web-based conversational partners.

Student-stakeholder/mentor interactions. A Web site constructed to include non-students as well as registered students would enable real-life clients or stakeholders to inject real-world relevancy into an academic course, especially a distance-based course. For example, students pursuing a course on disability studies would benefit from Web-based interactions with persons with disabilities, through a discussion area.

Student-alumni interactions. A shared Web site could simultaneously present for-credit academic content to students and continuing education content to alumni. Alumni could introduce students to real-world applications of the content and provide formative feedback on the first drafts of student assignments. As alumni become acquainted with students' work, this familiarity could lead to job offers and letters of recommendation. These activities could cause alumni to establish deeper, life-long connections to their alma maters.

Interdisciplinary learning opportunities. Discipline-specific coursework and clinical experiences typically segregate student cohorts. Yet, upon graduation and subsequent employment, graduates may be expected to engage proficiently in interdisciplinary collaboration. Shared Web sites could provide opportunities for students from varied health and rehabilitation disciplines, for example, to apply evidence-based research to clinical problem solving.

User-Centric Portals

Thus far, I have advocated for integrated, multi-purpose course Web sites. An even greater challenge is to enable users to enjoy integrated and long-term access to their prior educational experiences, accomplishments, and works-in-progress. I therefore propose that designers of software and information systems, higher education administrators, and instructional designers reach beyond single-course Web sites and multi-purpose Web sites. The goal would be to develop user-centric (versus disposable course-centric or institution-centric) repositories of learner experience and accomplishment that move beyond single-course management to life-long knowledge management. The ideal user-centric portal would provide "grade-school to grave" continuity and accommodate a user's varied and evolving educational pursuits, employment, and intellectual interests.

The possibilities presented here cover a continuum from minor adjustments to the existing practice to a new approach to life-long knowledge management. They offer a rich area for educational innovations and future commercial developments. *e*

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