Perspectives in Web Course Management

Bruce L. Mann (ed.) Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2000, 291 pp., ISBN 1-55130-143-1

Over the past five to seven years there has been a proliferation of web-based courses offered by universities across the country. Much discussion of the merits and pitfalls of these courses has accompanied this growth, leaving the uninitiated wondering which way to turn, how best to proceed and even whether they should embark on the development of web-based instruction. Bruce Mann has brought together a meaningful collection of articles intended to provide information to those asking such questions. And even those who think they know the answers will find food for thought in this book. More importantly, many of the articles offer a framework for re-examining the instructional process and all that is involved in the delivery of university-level teaching.

The book is well-structured and divided into five sections: Theories and Models of Web Course Management, Web Course Management, Web Course Tools, Web Course Assessment, and Application of Web Course Management. Each section offers a concise and probing examination of the issues. And, after a thorough read one might find that *Caveat Emptor* is the catch phrase of this book. Each section explores the issues, each raises questions, and each offers answers.

The most promising aspect of the book, however, is that many of the articles require the reader to re-examine prior thinking about instruction and the instructional process. For example, re-place and re-create (hyphens are intentional) are two verbs offered by Marc Glassman and Gary Boyd respectively, to encourage fresh approaches. A very real concern of many academics is that of ownership of instruction. As an instructor who places my courses online (let's not worry at the moment about how this is best done) I cannot help but be concerned whether the delivery of my course will be undertaken by teaching assistants and/or technicians. Glassman argues strongly that "instructional technology re-replaces as opposed to replaces the teacher and the learner." (p. 32) Consequently, when done properly, web-based instruction should result in both the teacher and the learner being "actively involved in the process of re-inventing their roles in the instructional/learning process." (p. 32) After reading Glassman's article you will realize that a pedagogically sound web-based course requires a significant amount of interaction between the learner and the instructor.

Dealing with the larger question of what we as academics are trying to accomplish, Boyd embarks upon a philosophical discussion examining the role of what he calls the "webversity", an entity analogous to the university. He argues that although the primary goal of education is to improve the quality of life of the masses, there is also a leaning toward scholars cloning themselves and their ideas, values and personalities, thereby propagating their self-identities. He cites as an example the case of the early twentieth century psychologists who "devolved into rigorous behaviourism and are only now mutating into

cognitivism.” (p. 73) He strongly suggests that scholars develop in their students those skills and attitudes which reflect their own personal skills and attitudes, and that this process is repeated generation after generation. He speaks of the lure of education and how academics attract students to their ideas. Good teaching should result in change in the students. Isn't that why they came to university in the first place - to learn new ideas and to change their behaviour?

To further explore the issue Boyd ponders the notion of the ethical concerns of education. “Can we indoctrinate people to be immune to indoctrination?”... he asks. Is it ethical or moral to seduce people into self-transformation? One answer is Yes, if the result is good for society.” (p. 74) The similarity to Glassman's position is that both are concerned with how web based instruction results in change of the instructional process as well. Boyd concludes that “progressive re-creation of academic scholar researchers and reflective professionals can be done...via the web, but only when the web is augmented with some intensive face-to-face group work at frequent occasions. It should be done because it can ameliorate life.” (p. 76)

The collection goes on to examine legal issues as well as why the web has not turned out to be the panacea it was expected to be. Richard Seltzer asks why the walls did not come tumbling down? In recounting the history of the development of the web, Seltzer recalls our expectations of the web as it existed in 1993. At that time our vision was to have “Internet-style sharing on a larger scale, vast amounts of information immediately available for free to anyone, anywhere, students and teachers connecting with one another, teaching one another regardless of institutional walls and geography and courses of all kinds available online to anyone, anywhere. In brief, “we would have libraries without walls, schools without walls, and walls without walls” (p. 81). For him there is a gap between what is possible and what is real, and he envisions a cyclical process. Today we have a new vision. In all likelihood we will never attain that vision but rather, move down the road toward it and subsequently change our current vision to reflect how society has changed. As the spiral continues, creativity looms large on the horizon and it is incumbent upon us to find new opportunities for changing the ways people learn and teach.

The section dealing with web course tools is less interesting and dated. Not because it is poorly written nor because the contributors are not making scholarly offerings, but because technology is ever changing, and changing rapidly. State-of-the-art technology today is passé tomorrow. And so a discussion of today's relevant tools becomes quickly dated. That said, a person considering web course development will find informative descriptions and evaluations of the more common tools available in 2000. As with all technology, we do not necessarily replace it because we can. Oftentimes, an institution will adopt a technology and not migrate to the next generation of that technology for any of several valid reasons. The book offers valuable suggestions regarding the design of a website, the use of digitized speech, and other enhancements, as well as expected difficulties in managing a web course.

The book concludes with a series of articles dealing with various experiences of web developers. We can all learn from colleagues, and examining the

experiences of other developers can help us avoid many mistakes. Overall, *Perspectives in Web-Based Course Management* is an excellent resource guide for scholars and academics interested in developing web-based instruction. Furthermore, it serves as a primer for those who are thinking about the issues as well as those looking for ideas and suggestions.

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