



# Just a Tool: Instructors' Attitudes and Use of Course Management Systems for Online Writing Instruction

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## Abstract

This study uses interview and observation data from first-year composition instructors to determine how instructors' experiences with course management systems (CMSs) influence their teaching practices within those spaces. I determine that although instructors recognize the potential significance of CMSs, there is still a great disparity between instructors' practices in face-to-face and CMS spaces with many instructors failing to see their use of CMSs as part of their pedagogical practice.

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## 1. The Landscape of Online Learning Environments (OLE)

It's no secret that college composition no longer deals solely in print products composed in traditional classrooms. The landscape of twenty-first century composition includes digital compositions crafted in a host of online spaces—most often online learning environments. The evolution of composition studies has led to the increasingly vital study of online learning and, more specifically, online writing instruction (OWI). This study expands on that research tradition to examine composition instructors' practices, experiences, and attitudes in online learning environments (OLEs). Using interview and observation data I describe instructors' teaching practices in face-to-face classrooms versus online spaces, analyze the motivations for instructor adoption of online learning tools, and discuss the limitations and attitudes of those instructors' teaching in OLE.

In OWI scholarship, a sometimes overlooked but significant aspect of teaching and learning is the use of both independently adopted and institutionally mandated online learning environments. OLEs, which can include course management systems (CMSs), websites, blogs, wikis, and forums, are extensions or supplements to face-to-face learning. These environments can be viewed idealistically, as extensions of the human mind, like in the cases of [Vannevar Bush's \(1945\) memex](#), [Howard Rheingold's \(2000\) virtual community](#), and [Theodore Nelson's \(2001\) Project Xanadu](#). These environments allow instructor- and student-users to move beyond the constraints of a physical classroom, but

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they also have the potential to act as policing mechanisms through monitoring tools that track users like in Foucault's panopticon. They can even, as [Xornam S. Apedoe \(2005\)](#) argues, constrain teaching and learning to mere information dissemination in the place of the more abstract knowledge creation that is so often valued in composition studies.

Despite online instruction's growing prevalence in higher education, more study is still needed on the impacts of OLEs, especially in OWI. OLEs are used to manage courses on almost all university campuses, as well as in many high schools and middle schools across the United States. In 2007, only 3.9 million students took at least one course online, about 20% of all students but in 2015 that number rose to 5.8 million students, approximately 28.4% of all enrolled ([Allen & Seaman, 2008, 2016](#)). The number of students learning online continues to steadily rise at both public and private not-for-profit institutions, for both distance learning and, increasingly, local students. As of 2016, over 86.5% of universities offered online sections in their course catalogue, and 62.4% of universities offered at least one program entirely online (Allen & Seaman). The universities offering these courses do so most often in institutionally adopted OLEs that instructor-users, regardless of experience level and discipline must use in their courses—both online and face-to-face.

The OLEs institutions use to host these courses can include any spaces retained online and used for instructor and student access, but these environments often manifest in CMSs. Most often, individual pages or course sites within the CMS contain materials specific to each course, either to supplement face-to-face instruction in web-mediated courses, blend face-to-face and online learning in hybrid courses, or deliver instruction exclusively online synchronously or asynchronously for online-only courses. Online-only courses are most often used by universities to facilitate distance learning, but online courses are increasingly made available for students taking other classes in face-to-face spaces on campus. Though online courses still do attract “a specific type of learner” ([Blair & Hoy, 2006, p. 34](#)) typically assumed to be “adult learners,” these classes are taken by students of all backgrounds, majors, and experience levels. Even when courses are offered in face-to-face settings, they are frequently, often at the behest of the institution, supplemented in some way by an online presence in a CMS—although this presence might be nothing more than a syllabus uploaded to a course shell.

While courses housed or supplemented by CMSs can provide users with an environment to extend learning beyond the physical classroom, these course sites also differ greatly from the physical spaces instructors and students are used to, especially in terms of design, organization, and levels of interactivity. Courses in OLEs have the potential to both reach diverse learners and limit available means of communication to those offered in the system's software package.

Despite the limitations and often held frustrations with CMSs, they are by far the most often used systems to facilitate online instruction. The CMS industry, comprised of systems like Blackboard, Moodle, Desire2Learn, and Canvas, is worth several billion dollars; In 2013 the industry was projected to more than triple its revenue in five years—the \$2.55 billion industry was slated to become a \$7.83 billion industry by 2018 ([Straumsheim, 2013](#)). CMS companies are on track to meet if not dramatically exceed this estimate. In 2014 alone, Forbes reported the industry saw 21% growth. With over 350 CMS providers in the United States and over 600 worldwide, as well as over 62% of college courses reporting use of a university-mandated CMS, the size and scope of these tools is hard to deny ([Bersin, 2014](#); [The Campus Computing Project, 2013](#)). Blackboard—the leading software package—is responsible for providing service to 41% of United States' college campuses, while Moodle and Desire2Learn, the second and third most widely used CMS, provide service to another third of those campuses combined ([The Campus Computing Project, 2013](#)). As the industry grows, so do the majority stakeholders in that industry. Blackboard has claimed its place at the top of CMSs by systematically absorbing competitor programs and tools, including the once industry leading systems WebCT and Angel as well as smaller start-up systems developed by individual universities ([Clabaugh, 2015](#); [Jaschik, 2009](#); [Kangaroo, 2015](#); [Lederman, 2005](#); [Picciano & Spring, 2013](#)). Blackboard is not the only CMS that holds a large portion of the market share, however, and of universities that use CMSs, 94% use a standard or campus-wide system ([The Campus Computing Project, 2013](#)). CMSs like Blackboard typically require paid software licenses assigned to institutions based on the number of individual users accessing the program through their servers, meaning institutions are more likely to purchase licensing in bulk than allow instructors to make purchasing decisions on a course by course basis. Ultimately, this places instructors at the will of the institution, regardless of the type of courses they teach and their individual teaching philosophies and practices. These limitations can impact OWI greatly, especially in the light of the variety of practices and philosophies employed to teach composition. Indeed, as [Colleen A. Reilly and Joseph John Williams \(2006\)](#) point out, “personal labor practices and institutional business decisions have a much greater influence on which tools are chosen than do ideology or pedagogy” (p. 68). Instructors often feel pressure from the institution or their students to adopt the institutional CMS regardless of their personal

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