THE IMPACT OF COURSE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS LIKE BLACKBOARD ON
FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY AND PRACTICE

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THE IMPACT OF COURSE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS LIKE BLACKBOARD IN
FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

As online writing instruction (OWI) rises in prevalence at U.S. universities, the need for research into effective pedagogies increases. Using interview and observation data from first-year composition instructors, this thesis argues instructors’ experiences with course management systems (CMS) and therefore the way they teach in those spaces are shaped by the limitations and constraints they perceive as existing in those spaces. While instructors recognize the potential significance of CMS, there is still great disparity between instructors’ practices in face-to-face and CMS spaces with many instructors failing to see their use of CMS as part of the teaching practice.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Role of Course Management Systems in Composition Studies

Necessity may breed invention, but so do curiosity and the assumption that everything can, and should, be improved upon. Even higher education, notorious for its resistance to change, cannot escape the increasingly digital nature of the twenty-first century with its propensity for continuous upgrades. Though computers, word processing software, and PowerPoint slides have become new “necessities” in university courses, no digital technologies have reached ubiquity in higher education without scrutiny from faculty, administrators, and students alike.

Often at the forefront of this examination are questions about the impact new technologies might have on teaching and learning. Composition studies is arguably most closely aligned with education, as the field focuses largely on discovering effective pedagogies (Lu & Horner, 2009). As a result of this focus, scholars in composition studies frequently spearhead research to answer those questions of technologies’ impact and effectiveness. A history of studying teaching practices as well as document and system design gives composition studies a head start in this research (Allen, 1996; Bartholomae, 1986; Elbow, 2000; Selber, 2003; Selfe & Selfe, 1994; Tufte, 1983).

In the early 1990s, computer labs began to appear on college campuses with expectations that personal computing was going to, in some way, revolutionize processes of teaching and learning. Almost as quickly as these computer labs were built composition scholars began to study them, observing the ways these computer-mediated spaces impacted student writers and writing instructors. Hawisher and Sefle (1991) and Klem and Moran (1992) studied writing courses conducted exclusively in computer lab environments. Both ultimately advocate for critical pedagogy when using technology in the classroom. This argument was later applied to
the use of tools for digital composing and online learning in composition courses. Critical pedagogy and technology use soon became essential effective practices for writing instruction.

With the rise in digital modalities available to student writers, scholars like Yancey (2004), Takayoshi and Selfe (2007), Shipka (2011), and Palmeri (2012) tried to make sense of the relationship between these modalities and the twenty-first century composition classroom. It was unclear, even in the early aughts, how audio, video, and webtext compositions fit in writing instruction. Yancey (2004) points out the evolving nature of composition studies. She argues as English majors diminish and English departments relocate to “communication” or “new media,” the discipline must also consider the relocation of composition from page to screen. Takayoshi and Selfe (2007) provide resources for instructors to implement multimodal composition and digital technology in their courses. Shipka (2011) contends it is not necessary for multimodal composition to include digital technologies at all. Palmeri (2012) supports a similar argument that composition was “always, already” multimodal, even before the prevalence of digital technologies, though he does argue in favor of using digital tools for composing. Each of these voices contributes to the ongoing conversation of multimodal composing and provides a new perspective for composition studies to consider. The conversation on multimodal composing is ongoing as new technologies and uses for those technologies develop.

Composition scholars are not only concerned with digital modalities though. So too are scholars interested in various environments students compose in. Like the physical space of computer labs, digital environments are also worthy of study. These environments include the spaces created by and housed in computer software and hardware. Selfe and Selfe (1994) prompt composition instructors to look beyond “overoptimistic” views of digital interfaces to account for the characteristics of those interfaces as well as the users interacting with them (p. 482). The
impact technologies have on their users is the result of both the design of their interfaces and the ways users and facilitators apply those technologies. As facilitators of technology mediated classrooms, spaces that include use of word processing software, email messaging, and personal computers, composition instructors must be conscious of the impact technology has on their pedagogical practices as well as the work of student writers. Selfe and Selfe (1994) conclude instructors often unconsciously apply technology in their classes, but instead must act as influencers of technologies’ use while teaching students to do the same. Thus, the role of the composition teacher is elevated beyond instructor-user to designer and technology critic. The implication of the politics of the interface is that critical application should be an ethical imperative of composition instructors, applied to all technologies they encounter and ask students to use.

The Rise of the Course Management System

As Selfe and Selfe (1994) recognize, the environments students and instructors compose in have progressed well beyond the traditional classroom in the last twenty years. Digital environments continue to evolve. Word processing software and university email no longer claim supremacy as the main digital composing environments on college campuses. Now, composing spaces regularly include online learning environments (OLE), adopted campus-wide and most commonly manifested in programs called course management systems (CMS). OLE can include any spaces retained online and used for student and instructor access. Most often, as is the case with CMS, they contain individual pages or “course sites” for each class, either to supplement face-to-face instruction like in “web-mediated” courses, to blend face-to-face and online learning like in “hybrid” courses, or deliver courses exclusively online synchronously or asynchronously (see Table 1 and Glossary). Online-only courses are most often employed by
universities to facilitate distance learning because instructors and students can meet online regardless of their physical locations; however, these courses are also available for students taking other classes on campus. Courses facilitated by OLE are taken by students of all backgrounds, majors, and experience levels. The number of courses offered exclusively online continues to increase across institutions of higher education as do face-to-face courses supplemented by an online course site.

Table 1

*Course types used in online writing instruction (OWI)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Type</th>
<th>Percentage of Instruction Online</th>
<th>Common Procedures/Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>face-to-face</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>• written or oral communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• little to no intervention or mediation from OLE to communicate beyond the physical classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>web-mediated</td>
<td>1-29%</td>
<td>• written or oral communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• OLE used to communicate beyond the physical classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• course sites in CMS or other OLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hybrid/blended</td>
<td>30-79%</td>
<td>• both face-to-face and online instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• substantial amount of the assignments are completed online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>online/online-only</td>
<td>80-100%</td>
<td>• all or nearly all instruction conducted online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• synchronous or asynchronous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• uses a CMS or other OLE in place of face-to-face instruction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Online course sites delivered through CMS like Blackboard, Moodle, and Desire2Learn, provide students and instructors the environment to allow learning beyond the physical classroom. These course sites differ greatly from physical class spaces in terms of design,
organization, and interactivity. Course sites housed in OLE potentially limit available means users have to communicate and learn to only those offered within the system. It is important to understand the differences in design and delivery between the physical classroom and various OLE, especially considering the politics of the interface and role of digital technology on composition studies.

Composition courses taught in OLE form a new kind course, often referred to as online writing instruction (OWI). OWI is responsible for forging new frontiers in the discipline of composition studies.

**Terminology**

Both the available tools and limitations of OLE can vary depending upon their design and intended uses. Specific distinctions should be made regarding terminology used to describe different systems used for online learning. Making these distinctions is necessary to critical use and study of OLE.

Despite their various investigations into these systems, both the fields of rhetoric and composition and information technology often refer to them by contradictory or confusing terminology. Words applied to systems used to mediate online learning are often employed without clear definitions or differentiation. Most often, the terms *course management system (CMS)* and *learning management system (LMS)* are used interchangeably, especially in rhetoric and composition literature. Frequently, the systems referred to in rhetoric and composition as LMS are defined by both information technology and the companies who design them as CMS. This conflation of terms can result in confusion about the capabilities of different systems, as well as the level of interaction users experience in said environments. Scholars and users may misunderstand the tools and limitations of a system, or that distinctions between systems even
exist. Confusing these systems or ignoring their differences can hamper research into their use and negatively influence users’ interactions with them.

To avoid misunderstandings, Watson and Watson (2007) call for a standardization of terms used to refer to these various OLE. They establish divisions between terms frequently used to discuss separate but related technologies including the aforementioned CMS and LMS, as well as learning content management systems (LCMS). To combat the “acronym-driven, non-standardized terms” in studies of educational technologies, Watson and Watson advocate a more transparent naming system be adopted by all researching OLE (p. 29). Due to the growing impact these various learning environments have on education, understanding their distinctive capabilities and applying more accurate terms in literature is paramount to communicating and conducting productive research. A guide to types of OLE can be found in Table 2.
Table 2

Types of online learning environments (OLE) and their functions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System Type</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Functions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course Management System (CMS)</td>
<td>Blackboard</td>
<td>• facilitate online-only or hybrid courses,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desire2Learn</td>
<td>• support digital course materials, student performance tracking, data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>storage, and communicative tools between users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Management System (LMS)</td>
<td>Schoology</td>
<td>• use course templates or “shells”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• perform the functions of a CMS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• transfer data (profiles, learning objectives, goals, etc.) between</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>course sites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• create a space for communication among courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Content Management System</td>
<td>Plato</td>
<td>• extensions of CMS or LMS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System (LCMS)</td>
<td>Courseware</td>
<td>• facilitate learning object creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• use assessments to track student progress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A further explanation of these terms and others used throughout this text can be found in the Glossary.

**Course management systems.** For the purposes of this study and using Watson and Watson as a guide, the term CMS will be used to describe learning environments that facilitate online-only, hybrid, and web-mediated courses through support of digital course materials, student performance tracking, data storage, and communicative tools between users. These systems often provide basic course templates or “shells” in which instructor-users upload content and use administrative tools to facilitate courses. Blackboard, the system used for the primary research in this study, self-identifies as a CMS and satisfies the criteria described above.
CMS are also notably the most widely used online environments in higher education. Blackboard provides service to 41% of United States’ campuses, while Moodle and Desire2Learn, the second and third most widely used CMS, provide service to 23% and 11% of campuses, respectively (The Campus Computing Project, 2013, p. 23). Blackboard’s majority market share of higher education users comes as a result of their absorption of 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; Kangarloo, 2015; Lederman, 2005; Picciano & Spring, 2013). CMS like Blackboard are most frequently restricted systems that require paid software licenses assigned to institutions based on their number of individual users. CMS companies also provide user-support, though local information technology departments usually supplement that support.

Learning management systems. Although LMS have the same capabilities of CMS, they are more systematic in nature, allowing users to transfer data including profiles, learning objectives, and goals from course site to course site within the larger system. These features allow users to interact with each other more than they can through CMS. Though they offer additional features, LMS are not frequently used by institutions of higher education, as demonstrated by the Campus Computing Survey (2013). Universities tend to favor CMS, especially proprietary system like Blackboard and Desire2Learn. Popular LMS like Schoology are often used by secondary schools, potentially due to users’ ability to transfer data between courses.

Learning content management systems. While CMS and LMS are the two most common types of OLE adopted by institutions of higher learning, some also use what are known as learning content management systems (LCMS). LCMS are programs within an LMS, and act
as extensions of those systems rather than individual learning environments. Content creators like instructors or instructional designers use LCMS to create learning objects or materials to help users with processes of teaching and learning. Plato Courseware, formerly Plato Learning Environment (PLE), is a popular LCMS. Systems like Plato Courseware allow institutions to maintain the interactivity provided by the LMS, while also using assessments content creators have designed to track individual students’ progress throughout their careers. In particular, Plato Courseware is frequently used by high school and middle school districts, and provides various self-described “solutions” to schools including “bad weather” assignments and tools for aligning content with the Common Core State Standards (Edmentum, 2015). Adding a LCMS can even make LMS more systematic and can provide content creators and instructors more control over the content and design of individual course sites.

Open source software. In addition to proprietary systems that require institutional licenses, like Blackboard and Plato Courseware, some CMS and LMS are available as open source software. Open source systems offer open access to users without a subscription cost. Because they provide their users with the system code and encourage users to contribute new content to that code, open source systems promote more collaborative development models than the proprietary alternatives. Although this model encourages users to adapt the software to their needs, a desirable feature for instructors concerned with issues of pedagogical freedom, it can be difficult to adopt open source software due to pre-existing institutional policies and investments made toward CMS licensing. According to Reilly and Williams (2005), space for hosting these programs and the limited time instructors have available to learn new systems’ capabilities can prevent open source software from being adopted by institutions where instructors might benefit from more control over system design. In some cases though, the advantages available through
open source software are not clearly defined by their providers. Sakai, a prominent open source LMS, claims to “expand” possibilities for its users, but does not clearly define those possibilities or demonstrate how it would replace other proprietary systems (Sakai, 2014). It is far more likely for institutions to use licensed programs like Blackboard, potentially limiting the degree to which instructors use those spaces because they are familiar. Institutions are likely to continue subscribing to a system that has worked in the past and which they have already invested time and money in rather than staring over with a new system. Even when there is no subscription or licensing fee, the cost of adopted a new system can be substantial for an institution, especially in the time and labor spent to learn and support that system.

**Challenges of CMS**

On campuses where CMS are adopted, whether proprietary or open source, faculty and information technology system specialists face a unique set of challenges. Where there once was a clear boundary between their positions, IT specialists and instructors now share an assortment of responsibilities for teaching students to learn in CMS. These responsibilities, often poorly defined and understood by each group, can lead to disagreements and even goals left unachieved.

These new challenges are due, at least in part, to the new duties added to their job descriptions because of the rise of CMS. IT specialists most often provide local support for CMS users and serve as liaisons between instructor-users and system providers. They are answer any immediate questions local CMS users have and provide support when users have trouble with system tools. Instructors on the other hand are responsible for using those tools in the courses they teach. Instructors must use CMS in what were once exclusively face-to-face courses either to meet students’ expectations, to make tasks like grading and email easier, or because they are encouraged to by their institutions. CMS use, especially the adoption of a new system, adds an
extra stress to instructors’ already full schedules. Similarly, where once IT specialists were required to maintain hardware and server spaces, they are now needed to teach instructors to use the CMS. As Carmean and Brown (2005) explain, this new duty adds strain to IT specialists’ schedules as well. Both groups, even when enthusiastic about the system, are subject to stress and burnout from these additional obligations. This stress is compounded by the knowledge gap that exists between both groups.

While IT specialists and faculty want to understand how to teach effectively using the system, they approach CMS issues from different disciplines and levels of experience. IT departments must provide support for all departments on campus. Instructors must provide support for all students in their classes. The knowledge gap between instructors and IT poses a challenge for both to communicate their needs and expertise. IT departments often provide training on how to use CMS tools, but instructors are challenged by not only learning those tools, but also by applying those tools successfully to their teaching. As Blair (2010) demonstrates, the limitations of faculty to use CMS are a result of their “the lack of technological training, not merely a how to, but a more critical why to” (p. 74). Instructors hold content knowledge and pedagogical experience, but IT specialists hold the system knowledge. This divide in experience effectively sequesters information in each group. These divisions in knowledge can also lead to misunderstandings and disagreements between groups, sometimes halting attempts to understand and apply the CMS at the institutional level.

Challenges in understanding the CMS extend well beyond institutional politics though, and delve into the expectations of what online learning can and should do. Is the CMS an extension and enhancement of the physical classroom, or a separate learning space altogether? Should CMS mimic the physical classroom, supplement it, or transform it entirely? Creating
effective models of OLE is especially challenging because online education shares and
contradicts features of both face-to-face courses and distance, previously correspondence,
courses, to form a distinct and often misunderstood learning space. As Harasim (1990) points
out, traditional distance education emphasizes the independence of the learner, while face-to-face
education emphasizes interactivity. In each model, the burden of learning is placed on either the
individual, in distance learning, or the group, in face-to-face learning. In online education,
however, learning is both interactive and social, and independent and student-centered. Rather
encourage learning by transfer with the instructor as the single holder and transmitter of
knowledge, online education encourages a group dynamic of knowledge creation among all
participants (Carmean & Haefner, 2002; Harasim, 1990). Posey and Lyons (2011) agree online
communication is a “paradox” able to “both enable and inhibit personal connections” (p. 364).
Online environments tend to take on a “many-to-many” system of learning in which peer
interaction, individual investigation, and cooperative group work are all essential. A similar
model is typically encouraged for teaching composition effectively. If this many-to-many model
is key to teaching in OLE, composition studies could prosper in such an environment. This
online model might also encourage a shift in popular teaching practices throughout higher
education disciplines toward a more complex approach toward knowledge creation.

However, though online environments theoretically combine the best of both models—
the independent, student-centered investigation of distance education, with the peer-centered,
collaborative, meaning making of face-to-face—they also prove difficult to adopt, for new and
experienced instructors alike. Despite the promises of online learning to revolutionize higher
education, technological growth and widespread implementation of these systems on university
campuses have outpaced research into their effectiveness as well as the impact they might have
on teaching practices. It is not yet known how CMS impact the teaching practices of particular disciplines, subjects, or individual instructors. Stine (2010) contends it is still unclear “what factors are most likely to make that online experience a successful one” (p. 51). Few studies have investigated the role of CMS implementation on learning and student success, other than to note that deeper learning is possible in these environments. Whether or not deeper learning is achieved, and achieved consistently, is unknown.

**Introduction to the Study**

Because these systems are used universally in institutions of higher education to facilitate online learning, it is essential that further study be done to ascertain the impact of CMS on pedagogical practices of instructors. It is especially paramount that composition faculty are studied, due to their consistent use of multimodalities and digital technologies in the classroom as well as composition studies’ history of studying interface design. Just as Selfe and Selfe argue, composition instructors must be critical of the politics of interfaces, so too must instructors be critical of these tools. Factors including the CMS’s various user-types, design features, and methods of implementation must be further considered.

To determine the role CMS play in composition instruction and pedagogical practices, this study will collect data from first-year composition instructors at a small, private university in the Midwest. Through one-on-one interviews and observations of their course sites, I will investigate instructors’ pedagogical practices as employed both in the physical classroom and Blackboard spaces. Through data collected from these interviews and observations, I will describe the relationship between instructors’ pedagogy and their use of the CMS. I will study the ways instructors view their pedagogy in physical classroom and CMS spaces, through the tools they use, the degree to which they use them, and the unique challenges they face using the
system. Additionally, I will record the classroom practices instructors use, translate, or abandon in the CMS environment. I will ultimately determine whether the CMS environment accommodates and reflects these instructors’ preferred pedagogical practices, or if their use of the CMS is largely administrative and supplemental to their instruction in the physical classroom.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses**

While considering the role CMS play in the teaching process, this study aims to examine the following:

1. To what extent do pedagogical practices and concepts of teaching influence instructors’ use of CMS?
2. What face-to-face classroom practices do instructors use in CMS and what practices do they abandon?
3. How are instructors’ face-to-face pedagogical practices influenced by their CMS use?
4. How do instructors perceive students’ experience of the CMS and how do those perceptions impact instructors’ design and facilitation of CMS spaces?
5. How do instructors interact with CMS and how significant do they feel that interaction is to their teaching practices?

The goal of this study is to better understand the connections between composition instructors’ teaching styles in the physical classroom and their use of CMS spaces. I am curious about what practices instructors transfer to CMS spaces, and what practices they use only in the physical classroom. While much has been written about the potential of OLE to facilitate deeper learning, little has been written about actual instructors and the practices they employ in these environments. It is important to find any gaps that may exist between the potential of OLE and
ways they are actually implemented. Better understanding how composition instructors use CMS will illuminate if these systems are used critically and where instructors may need more training to teach with these systems effectively.

I contend several patterns will arise in the data gathered in this study. Instructors’ responses to interview questions will likely vary, but I believe their responses will be similar on the subjects of CMS tool use, adoption of those tools, and frustrations and perceived limitations they have with the CMS. I hypothesize the following:

1. Composition instructors’ CMS use does not necessarily reflect their practices in the face-to-face classroom.

2. Composition instructors most often use CMS tools they feel will:
   a. improve efficiency, and
   b. make teaching and learning easier for themselves and their students.

3. Composition instructors believe they are limited by the capabilities of CMS and therefore:
   a. do not adopt many of the system’s tools, and
   b. do not use tools they cannot learn to use quickly.

4. Though possible, deeper learning is not often achieved in CMS environments.

5. Composition instructors do not view CMS as significant to successful teaching and learning.

Using the results of this study as well as the literature described in Chapter 2, I will consider the validity of these hypotheses further in Chapter 5.
**Scope of Scholarship**

Technology use in higher education is an area of study that falls into the purview of multiple disciplines. As a result, much of the scholarship used as basis for this study falls into information technology, education, and technical communication in addition to rhetoric and composition. While CMS are specifically addressed in many sources in information technology (Apedoe, 2005; Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2006; Carmean & Brown, 2005), and some in rhetoric and composition (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; D. Payne, 2005), few studies examine the significance of CMS in teaching and learning. The majority of research completed in rhetoric and composition focuses on computer use in the composition classroom, like computer labs (Klem & Moran, 1992; Hawisher & Selfe, 1991) or word processing software (Goldfine, 2001; Haas, 1989). Similarly, studies in information technology often focus on processes instructors use when deciding to use CMS tools (Liaw, 2008), or the theoretical capabilities of the systems (Carmean & Haefner, 2002). Therefore, in order to create a more complete basis for this research, I have adapted studies from information technology and rhetoric and composition to create a multidisciplinary approach while maintaining focus on the importance of pedagogy.

Though many information technology scholars accept that CMS are capable of delivery deeper learning outcomes as designed by Carmean and Haefner (2002), few have investigated to what degree or how frequently these outcomes are achieved. Furthermore, few studies have considered the impact instructors’ pedagogical practices and experiences with CMS have on the likelihood of achieving deeper learning. Instead, it is assumed that because deeper learning—learning that is social, active, contextual, engaging, and student-owned—is possible in CMS, deeper learning is inherent in implementation of those systems. In this view, individual pedagogies are neither influential on the use of the system, nor are they lost to the system’s
capabilities and limitations (Katz, 2003). The CMS would then somehow be neutral, neither impacting, nor impacted by different use. Not only does this line of reasoning restrict pedagogical freedom by assuming all pedagogies can fit into the same course shell, it also assumes that all courses have similar course goals that can all be achieved through the same tool.

Alternatively, scholars in rhetoric and composition often assume that because CMS are restrictive, they cannot be effectively used to teach or learn (Kuriloff, 2001; D. Payne, 2005). Just as it cannot be assumed that CMS inherently promote deeper learning, it cannot be assumed that they inherently prevent it. This perspective ignores the ingenuity users possess to adapt tools to different situations and apply those tools beyond their original intended use. In both cases, scholars ignore the politics of the interface, instead portraying CMS as passive, inadaptable tools built to either solve or create all problems of online instruction. Neither viewpoint is realistic or critical of real world applications of CMS. To better understand the actual impact CMS have on instruction, they must be further investigated to determine not only their capabilities and limitations, but also the ways they are already used in university courses to facilitate teaching and learning.

**Starting the Conversation**

This study will focus specifically on the CMS Blackboard, but the research questions explored here should serve as a jumping off point for further investigations of OLE in first-year composition programs. Though differences exist between both intended purposes and user populations of available OLE, all such systems provide some form of mediation for teaching and learning online through the use of digital tools and course templates. Understanding the way instructors use OLE will illuminate not only online teaching practices, but also the methods instructors use to translate these practices from face-to-face classroom pedagogy. As
Blair (2010) declares, “…it is vital that literary studies specialists in university settings question their own desire and ability to deliver their pedagogies digitally…question what role technology can play in fostering student-centered pedagogies,” and acknowledge “good teaching is as possible within a range of digital environments as it is within our traditional education spaces” (pp. 75-77). This study hopes to not only ask these questions, but to also stimulate conversation surrounding CMS, their influence on writing instruction, and improvements that can be made in their use.

It should be noted, however, that study of online instruction is central to all disciplines in higher education.

This thesis study will outline issues and current research into online writing instruction and learning and teaching in course management systems. A literature review detailing this research will be provided in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I will explain the methodology of this study including the participants, interview procedure, and process for recording result data. Chapter 4 will detail the results of the study with visual representations of that data in the form of tables and figures. A discussion of these results as they relate to ongoing research in the fields of composition studies, online writing instruction, and information technology will be included in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 will tie each of the previous chapters together in a conclusion, offering suggestions for future research of these issues.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Re-Inventing the University: Course Management Systems and Higher Education

Bartholomae (1986) describes the struggle of incoming college students to acclimate to university culture and writing expectations as a need to join “a branch” of that culture and “to learn to speak [the] language” (p. 1). According to Bartholomae, these students use first-year composition as a problem space to invent and reinvent the university and find appropriate means to communicate within its already established structures. In the twenty-first century, as digital technologies become more central to learning in higher education, the university has been reinvented again, this time by neither students, nor instructors. Instead, this reinvention, or perhaps re-envisioning, of the university comes from the influence of tools like OneDrive\(^1\), SharePoint\(^2\), and Blackboard, as well as the companies that develop them. As a result, not only students, but also instructors, information technology staff, and administrators, find themselves in the position of users, tasked with reinventing the university, including its policies, practices, and processes for learning.

This chapter will provide a brief review of literature in the fields of both rhetoric and composition and information technology. The literature mentioned will include research into the topics of online learning environments, online writing instruction, and course management systems. This review will expose gaps in existing literature that I will work to fill with this study, as well as provide basis for my methodology, and the discussion of my results provided in Chapter 5.

\(^1\) Microsoft application used by personal use and business clients for cloud storage and file sharing.
\(^2\) Microsoft web application used by business clients to manage content and files.
**Online Learning Environments**

One of the most notable changes in the twenty-first century university is the ubiquitous use of online learning environments (OLE). OLE, which can include course management systems (CMS), websites, blogs, wikis, and forums, are often described as extensions of the learning process, or even, idealistically, as extensions of the human mind, like in Bush’s (1945) memex, Nelson’s (2001) Project Xanadu, and Rheingold’s (2000) virtual community. These environments might allow for free association and collaboration among their users, but 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 Apedoe (2005) argues, constrain use to information dissemination rather than knowledge creation. It is still unclear which of these versions of online spaces OLE favor, or if they are an amalgamation of each.

We do know OLE can both facilitate distance education and mediate face-to-face courses. Some form of virtual environment is used to manage courses on almost all university campuses, as well as in many high schools and middle schools in the United States. The scope of online learning only continues to widen. In 2007 only 3.9 million students took at least one course online, about 20% of all students (Allen & Seaman, 2008). Allen and Seaman (2013) report that as of 2012, 6.7 million students were currently enrolled in at least one course online, approximately 32% of all students. The number of students learning online continues to steadily increase at all higher education institutions whether public or private. Of all universities over 86.5% offer online sections in their course catalogue, and 62.4% of universities offer at least one program entirely online (Allen & Seaman, 2013). These statistics suggest a pattern of OLE use and growth in higher education that is only likely to increase in the next decade.
The CMS industry, specifically, holds significant weight in the business of higher education and has recorded substantial growth in the past five years. MarketsandMarkets analyzing firm, as recounted by Straumsheim (2013), predicts the CMS industry will more than triple its revenue, expanding from a $2.55 billion industry to $7.83 billion by 2018. The industry is on track to meet if not exceed this estimate in the next few years. 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 CMS, the size and scope of these tools is hard to deny (Bersin, 2014; The Campus Computing Project, 2013). CMS are unlikely to disappear from university campuses anytime soon, which makes the call to investigate their degree of influence on teaching college composition all the more important. Of universities that use CMS, 94% use a standard or campus-wide system (The Campus Computing Project, 2013). While instructors might have the option to choose certain composing tools for their students, the prevalence of standardized systems means it is unlikely many instructors have a choice in choosing or rejecting a CMS. These statistics do not only confirm that online education is growing. They also demonstrate how vital it is that we study not only how to teach multimodal composing that includes multiple mediums, writing using blogs, or social media applications, but also how to teach writing using the means that are readily available and expected of our students: CMS.

Information Technologies’ Impact on Teaching and Learning

These utopian and dystopian versions of the systems aside, also in question is the ability CMS have to convey effective pedagogical practices. Considering CMS must facilitate courses taught in multiple, distinct disciplines, using a multitude of pedagogical practices, to students with varying learning styles, questions of effectiveness are essential. CMS have the potential to
inspire learning and extend the possibilities of physical classrooms, but also run the risk of devolving into constrained spaces where the system is limited or ill-suited for learning. CMS have the potential to be anything in between these two extremes, however, where a system falls on that scale, from motivation to constraint has as much to do with its implementation as design.

Though there has not been extensive study on the impact of design and user influence on CMS success, many have questioned the effectiveness of the systems. As mentioned in the introduction in Chapter 1, scholars often debate CMSs’ abilities to fulfill different courses’ learning objectives. While some argue adopting a CMS is inherently beneficial to students and instructors, others view CMS adoption as universally detrimental to pedagogical best practices. Whereas in the past making “no significant difference” to students’ learning was acceptable, that ambivalent view of CMS is changing (Carmean & Brown, 2005, p. 2). Information technology and rhetoric and composition scholars alike argue not enough is yet known about CMS to make a clear determination about the balance between possible benefit and harm. Stine (2010) argues distance learning poses “the potential for significant benefit but also for significant harm,” and continues to complicate the yet undefined degree of CMS success (p. 50). Even so, some have attempted to prove the systems to be either universal successes or abject failures.

Carmean and Haefner (2002), building on the research of several education and information technology scholars, define deeper learning as learning that is social, active, contextual, engaging, and student-owned. They argue deeper learning is possible in and encouraged by CMS environments. Though they agree it is possible, Carmean and Haefner also emphasize the need for “an understanding of best practice” to achieve deeper learning using CMS (p. 33). They reason these systems are useful to encourage deeper learning, but Carmean and Haefner are careful to distinguish CMS as only minimally influential on the pedagogy of
instructor-users. They note choices instructor-users make when designing and using CMS are determined by their individual pedagogical styles, personalities, and practices, rather than by the system’s pre-existing features and content. Through this lens, CMS might appear to be neutral. Unfortunately, no system is “innocent” (Selber, 2003; Selfe & Selfe, 1994; Vaidhyanathan, 2004). Still, some scholars try to argue the CMS are passive rather than influential to instructor-users’ design choices.

Katz (2003) agrees with Carmean and Haefner that CMS do not “dictate either a discipline or pedagogy” (p. 54). He asserts CMS do not promote particular teaching styles and are therefore inclusive to all forms of instruction regardless of the subject matter taught, or instructors’ preferred teaching styles. However, even though he claims that CMS are not responsible for creating or directing pedagogical decisions, Katz argues CMS should become “the fabric of the educational experience, in much the same way chalk, blackboards…[and] uncomfortable chairs…have become part of the historical fabric” (p. 56). CMS should be standard pieces of university culture according to Katz. He also hypothesizes faculty are critical of CMS because they are unwilling to relinquish control to a system that improves upon their favored but tired modes of instruction. Katz’s statements are contradictory, simultaneously minimizing the impact of tools on teaching while espousing the influence tools have on learning. He also contends that CMS do not create or dictate pedagogical practices, but somehow improve upon what Katz considers outdated methods. It is difficult then to determine if Katz views CMS as a neutral tool, or an influential piece of the twenty-first century university. In fact, he seems to portray CMS as both neutral and influential simultaneously. In any case, he promotes CMS as essential to the progress of contemporary higher education, concluding the skepticism they face is unfounded.
Notwithstanding Katz’s unwavering, if not inconsistent, endorsement of CMS neutrality, fellow education technology scholar Boettcher (2003) opposes his desire for a quick embrace of the systems. Instead, she calls for a more cautious adoption of CMS in education. Citing Vygotsky’s study of the role tools and environments play in knowledge acquisition, Boettcher stresses that the way instructors approach and design OLE directly impacts the way their students learn in those spaces. Posey and Lyons (2011) agree student success in online learning depends on instructors choosing to use the right tool at the right time. The features available in the OLE and the ways instructors use those features drive the communication and collaboration that takes place between users of that space. If Boettcher, and Posey and Lyons’ assertions are correct, the CMS is less a neutral tool and more a technology that instructors must apply thoughtfully and critically.

Likewise, Carmean and Brown (2005) regard critical implementation of CMS by instructors necessary to any successful online instruction. Learning is dictated by students’ decisions to learn, and tools alone cannot guarantee deeper learning or critical technology use (Carmean & Haefner, 2002). In order to achieve deeper learning, instructors must act as facilitators, designing spaces in which students can learn and want to learn. Resta and Laferrière (2007) agree; students must engage in community discourse in a “joint problem space” to participate in meaning making (p. 73). That joint problem space has to be designed in a way that allows students to problem solve with their peers. Conversely, Carmean and Haefner, and Katz argue the correlation between CMS and teaching practices is minimal if existent at all. They agree students must decide to learn, but maintain the CMS alone does not and cannot play a part in the degree of learning students achieve. It is unclear, despite information technology studies’
scope of literature on the subject, if the CMS is, or, as Lomas and Rauch (2005) conclude, is “not sufficient in itself” (p. 100).

**Technology and Pedagogy in Composition Studies**

A similar debate over the influence digital tools have on pedagogy is present in rhetoric and composition studies. As is true in the field of information technology, rhetoric and composition scholars seem split over the issue. Hawisher and Selfe (1991) find when critical pedagogy is not applied to classroom technology use the result is poor pedagogy. Poor pedagogy is exacerbated by poor technology use, however technologies also have the ability to enhance effective pedagogies. Klem and Moran (1992) contest, “technology, of and by itself, does not magically change the ways in which we teach” (p. 14). They argue technology does not have the ability to impact teaching practices. For all of these scholars the technology of focus is the physical space of a computer lab. In neither study do the researchers address the concept of digital space, or the way the act of designing that space may influence instructors’ practices or students’ learning within it.

Blythe (2001) does challenge these concepts of digital space. He determines writing courses conducted via OLE not only use technology but also “are technologies themselves” and, as a result, composition instructors must become designers in addition to teachers (p. 330). Blythe’s broadening of composition instructors’ roles echoes Selfe and Selfe’s (1994) discussion of critical pedagogy and technology use. In Blythe’s interpretation, instructors are not only influenced by technology, but influence the implementation, design, and use of that technology as well. Understanding and harnessing that degree of influence can be challenging though since, as Blair (2010) points out, “faculty often fail to grasp their role in making online teaching successful” (p. 72). Although they do not always realize it, instructors who teach in OLE step
into a new role of designer and facilitator, creating the interface through which students learn. This role is not so different than the one instructors play in the designing and expanding the boundaries of the physical classroom spaces. In both digital and physical places, the class becomes a technology within a technology, a device for learning mediated by a space and set of tools.

It is the role of these spaces and tools, however that is consistently undefined and viewed in both disciplines as a complex problem for investigation. Various and frequently disparate views exist regarding the degree of impact CMS have on learning and pedagogy. It is often unclear where the boundaries lie between instructors’ pedagogy and system design, or between their delivery and content. More often than not though, as illustrated in Selfe and Selfe (1994), rhetoric and composition scholars acknowledge that these tools are not and cannot be neutral, “simple,” or “uncomplicated” (p. 500). Tools mediate learning and designed to build on the accumulating knowledge and perspectives of both the tool and task the tool mediates (Swarts, 2013). CMS design then, builds on both previous incarnations of OLE, instructors’ pedagogies, and the content delivered through that interface. Additionally, texts or tools created within a particular culture also reveal contexts of that culture and show how context was made through them (Longo & Fountain, 2013). The texts written within that culture shape its future texts, meaning CMS and the course sites housed within them reveal information about university culture while also shaping new parameters of that culture. In effect, CMS are helping to reinvent the university. It is possible CMS, through their widespread adoption at the university level and increasingly significant role in online learning, will unavoidably become part of the “historical fabric,” just as Katz contends they should.
Although CMS are becoming more central to the reinvented university, it still is unclear how courses mediated by these systems will be impacted by their design and prevalence. In both the long term and short term, to what degree is pedagogical freedom, and deeper learning enhanced or lost in CMS use? Scholars must consider the variety of teaching practices methods already employed in face-to-face settings and the complications that arise when translating these practices to a single, pre-designed environment. The CMS is, by design, a limited space, providing only so many tools and design options for instructors-users to choose from, but are these limitations enough to discount CMS as ineffective environments for learning?

Kuriloff (2001) accuses CMS environments of catering to the lowest common denominator, arguing they insist on uniform pedagogy, and constrain innovation in teaching. For Kuriloff, CMS are just a set of templates amounting to little more than quick fixes that “lack the depth and sophistication of solutions that will develop in the long term” (The Dangers of Current Course Management Systems section, para. 1). Kuriloff also claims that CMS are inherently restrictive to individualized pedagogies and therefore disregard issues of pedagogical freedom. It is, in Kuriloff’s estimation, impossible to adapt CMS shells to all courses and requirements, and asking instructors to do so is unethical.

D. Payne (2005) likewise depicts CMS as uniform, constrained, and unethical environments. For D. Payne, CMS are a version of a stereotype of suburbia:

[A] recently invented space for living that is mass-produced, homogeneous, and marked by codes of conformity and acquiescence to a U.S. middle class, one that—even if it doesn’t fully succeed—at least seeks to deny, mask, and erase all else. (p. 500)

This comparison of CMS to suburban housing echoes composition studies’ goals to foster community among writers, although D. Payne would argue CMS sites, like suburban housing,
prevents community rather than encourages it. D. Payne also identifies CMS adoption as a method for restricting teaching to bland templates, with each course design repeating itself, like same house design repeated over and over on a single suburban street. Both Kuriloff and D. Payne argue CMS promote cookie cutter courses and uniform pedagogies that do not meet the needs of all, or even most, courses taught in those environments. Teaching and learning in CMS are restricted by the boundaries of the system. These shells only address the needs of certain course types and favor teaching styles that are teacher centered rather than community forming.

Teaching in the CMS

To better understand the impact of CMS on various courses, Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2006), surveyed 40 MBA courses facilitated by CMS. Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich identify and define four distinct course types: objectivist-individual, objectivist-group, constructivist-individual, and constructivist-group. These courses are distinct in the degree each emphasizes either discovering existing meaning or making new meaning (objectivist or constructivist), and self-discovery or collaborative inquiry (individual or group) (see Tables 3 and 4). Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich found constructivist courses taught in CMS provided students with the lowest levels of delivery medium satisfaction in comparison to objectivist-individual and objectivist-group course types. In the courses studied, pedagogical design did impact user satisfaction and, by extension, the success of each course. These findings to some extent confirm Kuriloff and D. Payne’s claim that CMS restrict users, but they do little to demonstrate that the CMS is inherently damaging to teaching and learning, as the aforementioned scholars seem to suggest. If at least some courses are ineffective or unsuccessful when taught in CMS though, how should instructors proceed? It is unlikely all constructivist courses can be removed from CMS altogether, especially considering the institutional investment
in CMS discussed in Chapter 1. Instead, instructors must consider how to adapt both course sites and teaching practices to accommodate different course types and learning goals.

Table 3

*Course types by level of knowledge construction and collaboration.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Knowledge Construction</th>
<th>objectivist (transfer)</th>
<th>constructivist (construction)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Collaboration Focus</td>
<td>individual</td>
<td>group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

*Four potential course types named by Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2006).*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge Construction</th>
<th>Group Collaboration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No (Objectivist)</td>
<td>transfer-individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes (Constructivist)</td>
<td>construction-individual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is this adaptation and reenvisioning of online instruction that has many scholars, especially in composition studies, occupied. Despite the somewhat pessimistic view of constructivist courses in CMS environments described by Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich, Conrad and Donaldson (2011) actually call for more constructivist pedagogy in OLE. Conrad and Donaldson affirm a student-centered focus is integral to a successful online learning environment, as is true of a physical classroom environment. Well-designed OLE require students to establish learning goals, work together in groups, explore appropriate resources to answer meaningful questions, complete tasks that are multidisciplinary and authentic, and create products that are shared with an audience beyond the classroom, again much like a well-designed
physical classroom should do according to countless articles and policy statements on effective writing instruction. In order to apply these strategies effectively, instructors must assess students with methods that are ongoing and performance-based, rather than too focused on individual assignments or tasks. Each of these strategies, as well as Conrad and Donaldson’s Phases of Engagement for student users emphasize knowledge-construction and, therefore, constructivist pedagogy. These suggestions complicate Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich’s findings that CMS courses are less engaging for students, calling into question what exactly effective online instruction, especially online writing instruction (OWI) looks like. It is possible the constructivist courses in Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich’s study were unsuccessful due to instructors’ pedagogical practices rather than limitations of the CMS. Not knowing the reason for students’ lack of engagement in these courses emphasizes the need for more research into the impact CMS have on learning and OWI.

**Online Writing Instruction**

Though not all classroom practices have been clearly translated to online instruction, general models for composition courses taught online have been outlined by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). In 2013 the CCCC Executive Committee adopted A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI). This statement calls attention, first and foremost, to issues of access and inclusivity in OLE including issues of student access and practices that effectively address those issues. The statement also outlines instructional, faculty, and institutional principles, as well as suggestions for additional research into OWI. Key among these principles is the development of strategies for teaching in unique environments while not favoring teaching students how to use technology over how to write. The statement advocates for instructors to receive OWI specific
training and support from their institutions while also maintaining control over their course content and design. These principles emphasize online spaces as unique environments that require instructors to design.

The fact that the CCCC Executive Committee saw fit to develop this position statement also suggests an “urgent need” exists for composition scholars to study OLE (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2013, p. 31). The field has already recognized a need to develop new pedagogies specific to teaching writing in these environments, and OWI is an increasingly popular research topic for composition scholars. CCCC (2013) describes this particular position statement as “a blueprint for further investigation into OWI,” but, as Stine (2010) points out, “it is still far from clear…what factors are most likely to make that online experience a successful one” (p. 5; p. 51). CCCC admits potentially effective practices are “difficult to pin down” but argues the criteria outlined in their position statement be used as models (p. 7). Though these models are useful to composition instructors who increasingly need guidance in teaching online, little is known about the specific ways instructors may or may not be implementing OLE and meeting these loosely defined standards.

It is certain that more research must be done into the role of OLE and OWI in composition instruction. Composition instructors should be at the forefront of developing and adapting online writing pedagogies and should make an effort to study online instruction. As Stine (2010) reasons:

We do our students, the field of basic writing, and the richness of our professional composition discourse a disservice by remaining on the sidelines of the online education debate. Our questions, our experiences, and those of our students must begin to shape that conversation. (p. 51)
In order to develop effective practices and implement those practices, instructors need to investigate and reflect upon their own OLE use, problematize their digital classrooms, and experiment with pedagogies that adapt course sites into spaces for knowledge creation. As the CCCC advises, instructors should investigate OLE and online instruction when and as they teach in those environments. Primary research conducted by instructors is necessary to understanding the complex relationship between the CMS interface and their instruction.

A Space for Research

Apedoe (2005) echoes this call for additional research, specifically into CMS use. Apedoe claims the relationship between instructors’ pedagogy and their CMS use is often underestimated, a position that is supported by statements by Katz, and Carmean and Haefner that equate the system’s pedagogical value with that of a piece of chalk. Apedoe asserts instructors tend to have a particular teaching approach, but will change that approach if the learning environment demands it. Kuriloff agrees, asserting instructors often accommodate their teaching to fit the technology, whereas the technology should, in his opinion, accommodate their teaching. Kember (1997) similarly argues that teachers will change their practices to fit the space they teach in. Although there may be research to support of this position, Apedoe finds issues of teaching in the CMS specifically are under-researched and largely “ignored by those interested in the integration and use of technology…in higher education” (p. 59). Apedoe urges for further investigation into the role these tools have in the university, and in individual disciplines. Few studies exist which apply CMS design to particular subjects, or certain pedagogies to CMS specifically.

For composition studies the need for additional research only becomes more pressing as the prevalence of OWI and, in particular, online first-year writing courses (OFYW) increases.
While there is no concrete data yet available on the number of composition sections offered online, Jaschik (2010) reports these courses make up a “significant minority” of first-year composition course types offered. While research into this topic is not nonexistent, it is sparse. Rendahl and Kastman Breuch (2013) do address the role of online environments in OFYW, specifically the influence OLE have on practices like peer-to-peer interaction and collaboration. Investigating OFYW courses, Rendahl and Kastman Breuch find students enrolled in these sections had low expectations of peer interaction, they argue due to the use of an OLE. They allow this discovery might reflect either that (a) students participated in peer activity as a rote exercise or surface level learning, or (b) students experienced deeper learning but did not recognize it as such. They also point out that these findings should not be used to argue that online courses cannot teach writing with collaboration. Rather online courses do not appear to inspire expectations for deeper learning in students and a reliable method for instructors to construct peer collaboration in online writing courses has yet to be established. Posey and Lyons (2011), in their study of collaborative instructional design, agree that instructors need to work to overcome students’ preconceptions to create an effective learning space. A common thread throughout investigations of OWI is the emphasis on instructors’ roles as designers and facilitators.

These findings also support the view that online course design, rather than preexisting system design alone, impacts the effectiveness of online instruction. Likewise, Liaw (2008) cites design, multimedia quality, and levels of interactivity as factors that impact students’ impressions of OLE. As Rendahl and Kastman Breuch point out, students’ impressions can directly influence the degree of success an online course might have. If students believe a course site is designed well and will be effective, it is more likely to actually be effective because of
their confidence. Simply using the environment, or expecting the system to foster positive impressions and deliver deeper learning for students is not a realistic pedagogical stance to take. Instead, OLE must be designed by instructors to promote effective learning for their students, even if the system is inherently capable of deeper learning.

Effective pedagogy in OLE starts and ends with the instructor. Technologies’ presence alone does not improve or enhance learning, and instructors must pair critical pedagogy with effective course design in order to use technology advantageously (Boettcher, 2003; Conrad and Donaldson, 2011; Hawisher & Selfe, 1991; Liaw, 2008; Rendahl & Kastman Breuch, 2013). Still, even with guidance from teacher-scholars like Conrad and Donaldson (2011), and Hewett and Ehmann (2004), instructors might not recognize the full effect tools like CMS have on their courses and pedagogy. Despite Carmean and Haefner’s (2002) hypothesis that CMS can be used for deeper learning, collaboration, and knowledge construction, little has been done to document instructors’ real-world applications of CMS to their classes. Likewise, despite the interest rhetoric and composition has in digital technologies, tools, and OLE as an influence on teaching practices, few studies exist which investigate the influence of CMS on first-year composition pedagogy. More significant research must be done on the intersection of CMS and composition in order to fully understand the role this tool plays in the process of teaching composition.

In respect to problems students face when inventing the university, Bartholomae (1986) suggests, “one response…then, would be to determine just what the community’s conventions are, so that those conventions can be written out, [and] ‘demystified’” (p. 12). In a similar way, this project aims to demystify the conventions of the CMS as they currently exist in the university, and to understand the influence those conventions have over first-year composition instructors’ pedagogical practices. In Chapter 3 I will outline my methodology for this study, in
which I consider the implementation and application of Blackboard CMS in first-year composition courses in addition to the relationship between that use of digital space and instructors’ pedagogical practices in the physical classroom.
Chapter 3: Methodology

A Social Shaping Constant Comparison Approach

The following chapter will provide an explanation of this study’s methodology. This explanation will include descriptions of the participants, the process for obtaining data, as well as the process for labeling and organizing that data to obtain results. These results can be found in Chapter 4, with a discussion of those results in Chapter 5.

Overview of Methodology

Composition instructors at a small, private university in the Midwest were asked to participate in an independent, IRB-approved study to collect data on pedagogical practices and CMS use. The study consisted of two forms of data collection: 1) one-on-one interviews with composition instructors and 2) observations of those instructors’ Blackboard course sites via screen capture software or in-person demonstration. For the purposes of this study, the designation first-year composition instructors includes instructors who, at the time of study, taught the pre-requisite composition course, first-writing requirement course, and/or second-writing requirement course options at the university used for this study.

This study focuses exclusively on instructors’ experiences teaching first-year composition in a CMS environment. This focus was chosen for several reasons. Historically, rhetoric and composition scholars have researched processes of technology implementation and the effect of technology implementation on writing and the teaching of writing. This study continues this research tradition by investigating the effect implementing a specific technology, Blackboard CMS, has on teaching first-year writing.

Furthermore, at most colleges in the United States, first-year composition courses are graduation requirements for all students. Since, at the university in this study, all students are
required to take at least two composition courses, composition instructors’ CMS use is likely indicative of students’ introductory experiences with the system. All students share the experience of taking composition, usually as freshman. These courses are also typically small, with CCCC’s recommendation for “no more than 20 students per class” strictly followed (as cited in Horning, 2007, p. 19). Considering the relatively small class sizes, the fact these courses are frequently students’ introductory experience with this technology, and the focus of composition studies on technology, first-year composition instructors hold valuable insight on how faculty adopt and use CMS. As a result of the aforementioned factors, composition instructors also often “teach” the technology, despite the CCCC’s (2013) stance that instructors should favor teaching composition over technology use, meaning students’ knowledge of the CMS is shaped by these instructors. Students also feel more comfortable asking questions in courses with fewer students like first-year composition. In many cases, composition instructors can shape students perceptions of that technology by teaching the technology and asking students to use it frequently, as confirmed by Selfe and Selfe (1994). Understanding composition instructors’ CMS use can, therefore, speak to students’ larger perceptions and experiences in the CMS environment as well as the way other faculty may use that environment.

Participants in this study were instructors employed in the first-year composition program at different levels and came from various educational backgrounds. These participants included full-time faculty, adjunct professors, and graduate teaching assistants who held degrees in rhetoric and composition, English literature, creative writing, and English education. At the time of this study, all participating instructors frequently taught at least one composition course required for all students pursuing undergraduate degrees at the university used in this study. For further explanation of the university’s composition course sequence and requirements of those
courses refer to Appendix A. For study materials, including the email sent to potential participants and an interview protocol refer to Appendix B.

**Basis for Methods Used**

The methods of several studies in the fields of both information technology and rhetoric and composition were used to develop the methodology described in this chapter. A further explanation of these studies’ connections to the discussion of course management systems and online learning can be found in the literature review in Chapter 2. In research projects that investigate instructors’ use and adoption of CMS, interviews and surveys are frequently used to collect data (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2006; Dutton, Cheong, & Park, 2004; Liaw, 2008; West, Waddoups, & Graham, 2007). Studies that examine technology use in composition courses often collect data via classroom observations as well as interviews with instructors (Klem & Moran, 1992; Hawisher & Selfe, 1991). It was important to consider several methodologies when developing the methods for this project to determine not only the research norms of each discipline, but also what processes have yielded useful data in the past. The following studies were especially valuable in developing the multidisciplinary approach used here.

Dutton, Cheong, and Park (2004) use online surveys for faculty and students to collect data. These surveys were written using the social shaping of technology (SST) theory and were designed to help researchers understand (a) the motivations faculty and students had for using a virtual learning environment, (b) their perceptions of the usefulness of the environment, and (c) the ways they interacted with the environment as users. Using SST theory allowed researchers to consider the environmental and cultural implications of technology adoption, including the degree of influence technology’s supporters and critics had—in this case the influence of faculty
and students surveyed. Dutton, et al. use SST to critique the impact diverse user-groups have on the development and application of technologies like CMS at an institutional level.

In addition to surveys, West, Waddoups, and Graham (2007) conduct semi-structured interviews with a random population of instructors to represent the range of CMS implementation on a university campus. They first collect data from faculty who considered themselves users or non-users of the system. Then, West, et al. apply a constant comparison approach to associate pieces of their research with other pieces. This comparison process allows them to create a complex coding system to apply to new data as they collect it. They then use this coding system to understand the data and form conclusions about their results.

While interviews and surveys rely on participants to self-report their experiences, observations can confirm that data and also provide a way to collect additional data. Hawisher and Selfe (1991) and Klem and Moran (1992) both collect interview data to study computer lab use in composition courses, but they also use observations to collect data. Including observations allows researchers to move beyond studying theoretical responses into studying concrete practices. In some cases, like in Klem and Moran’s research, observation data can reveal discrepancies between participants’ self-perceptions and their practices. Pairing surveys or interviews with observations can ensure researchers collect more complex and reliable data. Both methods of data collection—one-on-one interviews and course site observations—were used in this study to better understand participants’ experiences. Applying both SST the constant comparison approach makes it easier to discover similarities, anomalies, and discrepancies among all sets of data collected.
Participants

Participants were volunteers who taught the university’s pre-requisite composition course, first-writing requirement, and/or second-writing requirement. Participants frequently taught either face-to-face course sections supplemented by a Blackboard course site, hybrid courses that met synchronously both face-to-face and online, and/or online asynchronous course sections conducted exclusively through a Blackboard course site. At this university, face-to-face sections made up the majority of composition courses taught, however, one to four online sections of the first-writing requirement, and one to two online sections of second-writing requirement course options were offered regularly. Some second-writing requirement course sections were also offered in a hybrid format, wherein students and instructors met once per week in a face-to-face setting and once per week in a synchronous online session in Blackboard’s Collaborate. Since these participants had various levels of Blackboard interaction including use that was supplementary and necessary to their courses, they were able to speak about a variety of experiences with the CMS.

Fifteen instructors participated in the study in some capacity. Not all instructors were in both interviewed and observed; however, all participating instructors were interviewed. This means all instructors who were observed were also interviewed.

Interviews

This section explains the interview process including participant demographics and questions asked.

Participants. Among interview participants:
• Twelve (80%) frequently taught pre-requisite writing or first-writing requirement sections
• Eight (53%) frequently taught the second-writing requirement
• Seven (47%) frequently taught sections of the first-writing requirement and second-writing requirement courses

Data on the courses participants taught was gathered from the university’s 2014 and 2015 spring, summer, and fall academic course schedules. The total number of interview participants was fifteen. Interview participants’ teaching duties are outlined in Table 5.

Table 5

*Interview participants by courses taught.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Participants (P¹)</th>
<th>15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Requisite/First Requirement</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Requirement</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Requirements</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were recruited for the study via email messages, with one reminder email sent approximately three weeks after the initial recruitment message. Recruitment led to a 69% response rate from all instructors who taught first-year composition courses. This sample included teaching assistants, adjunct faculty, and full-time faculty. A further breakdown of

³ All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.
interview participants’ response rates by their employment level can be seen in Table 6.

Recruitment documents and other study materials can be found in Appendix B.

Table 6

*Interview participant response rate by level of employment.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroup</th>
<th>Subgroup Response Rate</th>
<th>% of RR[^1] in each Subgroup</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Department Response Rate (RR[^1])</strong></td>
<td>69%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Assistants</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjuncts</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time Faculty</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Design and Procedure.** Instructors who frequently taught the pre-requisite writing course, first-writing requirement, or second-writing requirement options were interviewed regarding their use of Blackboard, the institutionally-adopted CMS. Questions were emailed to each participant before their interview in order to promote transparency and allow interviewees to prepare responses ahead of time. Most participants admitted they looked at the questions briefly, but had not prepared answers before the interview.

Interviews were semi-structured. All participants answered the same questions, but some questions were adapted slightly to fit each instructors’ individual experiences. For example, participants who pointed out that they had never taught without a CMS were asked how they imagined their teaching would change if they did not use it, rather than how their teaching had changed since beginning to use it. All questions were designed to be open-ended so participants could expand on issues, design features, and course activities they saw as relevant to their pedagogy and course sections. As interviews progressed, several patterns emerged, that revealed
decisions, needs, complaints, and perceptions instructors shared. These patterns will be described further in Chapter 4.

Interviews typically took between thirty and sixty minutes to conduct, with forty minutes being the average interview length. All instructors were asked questions during the interview process. Interview questions dealt with topics that included:

• Instructors’ in-class pedagogical style and practices
• Instructors’ practices in CMS spaces including tools used
• Instructors’ struggles or apprehensions with CMS
• Instructors’ perceptions of the role CMS play in teaching and learning

As the interview process progressed, less time was spent asking participants about particular tools, and more time was spent discussing the ways in which they used those tools, either successfully or unsuccessfully, in their teaching experiences. Although participants often mentioned what tools they used, they frequently had to be prompted to explain how they used those tools. As a result of the unique ways instructors claimed to use Blackboard tools, it became more valuable to spend less time cataloguing participants’ use of individual tools and instead focus on participants’ applications of those tools. An interview protocol, which includes interview questions and the average time spent on each question during interviews, is available in Appendix B.

Several times throughout each interview, including after the apparent conclusion of each interview, participants added to the answers they had given earlier in the interview. Sometimes participants remembered another tool they had used or tried, or wanted to clarify certain elements of their teaching style. Interviews were therefore recursive and evolved more as conversations between interviewer and interviewee than strict question and answer sessions.
Since interviews were only semi-structured they allowed for more organic conversations in which participants were likely to extend their answers, elaborate on unique experiences, and ask questions of the interviewer. Data collected from the interviews was, as a result of their conversational nature, more extensive than a written or oral survey would have permitted. Most participants spoke easily about their experiences in this forum. None of the participants appeared to have difficulty understanding or responding to the questions asked.

Most interviews were conducted face-to-face on the university campus; however, some interviews were conducted through alternative modes or in different locations to accommodate participants’ schedules. Interviews took place in private, shared, and public spaces, and during various times of the day and week. Interviews with full-time faculty were typically conducted in the participant’s private office, while adjunct faculty and teaching assistant’s interviews frequently took place in shared or public spaces like coffee shops, libraries, or office lounges.

Notes taken from the interviews were annotated and analyzed for patterns. As interviews were conducted and patterns emerged, a coding system consisting of relevant or repeated phrases and concepts was created. Later interviews conducted were coded using this system, akin to West, et al.’s (2007) use of constant comparison approach. Special notations were made where participants’ responses seemed to agree or disagree with each other, or where they used similar phrases and descriptions. For instance, some participants may have agreed that the CMS was “just a tool,” but used the system to different degrees. One participant might have called Blackboard a tool for posting a syllabus only, while a second participant might see it as a tool for using discussion boards, wikis, and group tools. In this case a notation would have been made to link the two responses while also showing the ways in which the instructors in question agreed and disagreed. After the conclusion of all fifteen interviews, notes and annotations of these
responses were then studied to reveal any confirmations or contradictions of previous studies like Liaw’s (2008) investigation of faculty CMS use for instance. Additionally, interview notes and annotations were used to code the observation portion of the study.

**Observations**

This section explains the observation process including participant demographics and study procedures.

**Participants.** Participants in the observation portion of the study were members of the interview group. Among the total nine observation participants

- Seven (78%) taught first-writing requirement sections
- Six (67%) taught second-writing requirement sections
- Four (44%) taught both sections of the first-writing requirement and second-writing requirement courses
- Six interview participants declined to participate in an observation

An outline of observation participants’ teaching duties can be seen in Table 7. The response rate for observation participants by their employment level can be seen in Table 8. The number of participants who completed each portion of the study can be seen in Table 9.
Table 7

*Observation participants by courses taught.*

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Participants (P₀)</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Requisite/First Requirement</td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>78%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Requirement</td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>67%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Requirements</td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>44%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8

*Observation participant response rate by level of employment.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroup</th>
<th>Subgroup Response Rate</th>
<th>% of RR₀ in each Subgroup</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Department Response Rate (RR₀)</td>
<td><strong>41%</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Assistants</td>
<td><strong>29%</strong></td>
<td><strong>22%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjuncts</td>
<td><strong>25%</strong></td>
<td><strong>11%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time Faculty</td>
<td><strong>55%</strong></td>
<td><strong>67%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9

*Participants’ degree of study involvement.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Participants in study (P^T)</th>
<th>15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview Only</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation Only</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview and Observation</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Design and Procedure.** To provide observations of their Blackboard course sites for this study, participants either recorded their course design process with screen capture software, or visually modeled their course sites during the interview process. Participants who modeled their course sites during their interviews explained that they could not record their design process because they either: already designed their site, or used the copy and paste feature to replicate course sites they had designed in previous semesters. Interview participants who declined to complete an observation similarly noted they had already designed their site, or only wanted to participate in an interview.

Observations that were recorded via screen capture were conducted remotely, with no researcher present, to allow participants the chance to design their sites in the environment they normally would, using the tools they normally would. Participants were not prompted to record particular aspects of their design process, or to focus on specific tools, design elements, or spaces in the course site. Observations were conducted entirely at the discretion of the participants and they could stop recording to end the observation at any time.
Alternatively, some participants modeled their course sites during their interview session rather than via screen capture. If participants were observed in this way, they were more likely to make connections between their responses and the site. These connections included areas where they felt they implemented particular pedagogical practices online or where CMS tools worked particularly well for their courses. Although less likely to make these connections, participants who completed recorded observations were able to design and demonstrate their course sites without researcher influence. This lack of researcher interference in the recorded observations allowed participants to demonstrate their CMS use uninhibited. Participants who completed face-to-face observations, however, were more likely to include a verbal description of the site design and make the aforementioned connections to their interviews and practices in the classroom.

Notes taken from participants’ observations were compared against the notes taken from their interviews, as well as compared against all the interviews collectively. Observations were annotated according to the coding system that emerged from the interview sessions and then compared against those responses. Additional key words and correlations emerged during this coding process. The notes from both portions of the study were ultimately analyzed for patterns, agreements, and disagreements among members of the study group and other studies conducted on similar topics.

**Limitations**

The study’s size and scope were its two greatest limitations. Studying one program only provided a limited perspective of CMS and their impact, since a wide variety of systems are available for higher education institutions to use. Though the response rate for this particular English department was strong, the sample size was still small, with only fifteen participants
Due to the complex and subjective nature of composition instruction, it is possible that the responses from this small sample do not reflect the experiences other first-year composition instructors. Keeping in mind that insensitivity to sample size suggests deviations in responses are more likely to occur in a small sample size, these responses could also be more varied than the responses from larger sample of composition instructors would be. Despite this potential limitation, in qualitative research depth and complexity of the data collected is more important than the quantity of data. In this case then, this small sample size allows for more complex data to be collected.

Despite this potential limitation, several similarities emerged from participants’ responses perhaps suggesting the risk of insensitivity to sample size was minimized. The similarities reflected among participants’ responses were necessary to creating an effective coding system to manage response data. Similarities were not considered the only valuable data collected, however. Discrepancies in responses were also noted, such as the tendency for participants to describe the similar in-class or CMS practices using different phrases. Participants did describe a wide range of perspectives and practices, notwithstanding their presence in the same, small English department. With attention given to the small sample size, the discrepancies in instructors’ responses could be reflective of the larger state of composition studies or they could exaggerate differences between composition instructors. Considering the aforementioned variety in participants’ educational backgrounds, however, it seems likely that these discrepancies are reflective of composition instructors overall, who also tend to come from various backgrounds. This study should be replicated at a larger composition department, or, ideally, in departments at several schools to determine if there is more or less similarity in responses among composition instructors of a larger sample size. Even though this sample size was limited, it did represent a
majority of the department studied and is therefore applicable, at the very least, to the CMS practices of the first-year composition program at the university in question. The study has validity at the local level of this university, and will be useful toward advocating for instructor training and discussing issues of access. Additionally, it can be used as a model for more extensive research of CMS use in composition studies, or for local studies conducting by individual universities.

This study is also somewhat limited by its focus on composition studies. It is possible that instructors in different disciplines may apply pedagogical theory to CMS in different ways, design course sites more or less successfully, or view CMS use more or less critically. As aforementioned, this study should be replicated in a variety of institutions, and also in a variety of departments and colleges. Understanding that different disciplines likely apply practices to CMS differently could aid not only composition studies, but also higher education as a whole in developing effective practices for OLE.

Despite these limitations of sample size and scope, this research holds relevance beyond the university used in this study and can be applied to a variety of institutions. Online education is growing at all institutions, even though smaller, private universities have experienced more growth in recent years due to their late adoption of OLE (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Larger, public institutions feature more prominent online learning programs and have larger percentages of students learning online but they also experienced extreme and sudden growth in online learning within the last ten years (Allen & Seaman, 2008; Allen & Seaman, 2013). As online learning continues to grow across institutions the need to study the implications of this growth is universally applicable. The study’s participants’ views on transferring face-to-face instruction to online environments will pertain to a variety of institutions because the challenges instructors
face are similar. Much in the way that CCCC developed *A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI)* to address effective practice models for all kinds of institutions, this study should be seen as a model of practices used by instructions. As suggested in Chapter 1 and in the above discussion of limitations, this study should be replicated using alternative settings and samples to confirm its findings and discover discrepancies that might exist among different institutions and program types. Chapter 4 will further discuss the results of this study as found through the application of constant comparative methodology.
Chapter 4: Results

Interview and Observation Data

The following chapter will relate the results of this study including qualitative and quantitative data, as well as visual representations of that data in the form of tables and figures. Two interview transcripts can be found in Appendix C of this text. These transcripts serve as examples of the interview process, data collected, and responses from participants. An interview protocol describing the questions asked and time spent on each question can be found in Appendix B.

Data was collected from both one-on-one interviews with first-year composition instructors and observations of their Blackboard course sites. Notes from both interviews and observations were coded according to patterns in responses. Results of each portion of the study will be described, with focus given to notable correlations, disagreements, or trends in the responses and observations. Charts and figures will be used to supplement or explain complex data.

Interviews

This section describes the results of the interview portion of the study.

Face-to-Face Pedagogical Practices. When asked to describe their pedagogy, participants reflected on projects they assigned, their use of class time, and theoretical stances they took on the teaching of writing. Responses and explanations of course content and practices varied by instructor, even among instructors teaching the same course.

Despite the variety of responses, most participants agreed that lecture should be a minimal component of classroom instruction. Among all participants, 73% mentioned they used lecture in the classroom, but only one participant claimed lecture as a major component of their
teaching. Instructors most often described their lectures as “short” or “brief,” about ten to fifteen minutes of class, and as a method for setting up in class activities. Rather than favor lecture as the main activity for a class session, instructors regularly mentioned group work, peer review, collaboration, and discussion as essential classroom practices. Participants also frequently made references to practices that were “student centered,” “knowledge creation,” or “community forming.” A text-cloud displaying the phrases participants used to describe their pedagogy can be seen in Figure 1.

![Text-cloud of words participants used to describe their pedagogy](image)

Figure 1. Text-cloud of words participants used to describe their pedagogy

A notable difference in participants’ responses arose when they described their role in the classroom. When describing this role, 40% described their classrooms as “flipped” or favoring student-led activities, while 27% described teacher-led activities or a “teacherly” persona as central to their classrooms. The remaining 33% of participants did not mention their teacher-student interaction at all, however, since instructors were not prompted to describe this
role explicitly it should not be seen as a deliberate omission. Even if they did describe their interaction with students, instructors typically spent more time discussing the kinds of assignments and activities they presented in class than their student-teacher dynamic.

Though not all instructors discussed their student-teacher relationship at length, several participants did define goals they had for their students. These goals most often included a desire for students to:

- participate in a classroom community,
- learn and apply skills beyond the classroom, and
- become more confident academic writers

Arguably, these goals are tangentially related to instructors’ relationships with their students. With this in mind, the majority of instructors who discussed goals described courses that were, at least in part, “flipped” with students’ participation in the class community and knowledge creation as central.

Though all responded to this question, some participants hesitated when describing their pedagogy. Participants often asked if they were answering the question appropriately or completely. Participants often added to their description as the interview progressed with more assignments, activities, or student goals. Frequently, participants gave these additional descriptions during their discussions of tools used in the CMS or their interaction with the CMS. Participants were never prompted to expand on their pedagogy during these other responses. They volunteered the information and often explained that a different question reminded them of something they had forgotten to mention earlier.

Despite similar responses overall, instructors teaching the same courses did not always employ the same or even similar pedagogical practices. Instead, instructors described a variety of
practices, demonstrating a wide range of teaching styles within the first-year composition program. Instructors also often mentioned techniques or theories they did not employ personally, but recognized as methods for teaching composition. The activity participants most frequently admitted they did not use in their own classrooms was peer review or another form of group work. While forming a classroom community was a popular goal instructors had for their students, participants noted group work or peer review was not always successful in their classes. Just as participants later mentioned CMS tools they did not use but were aware of, many mentioned classroom techniques they did not use.

**Use of Tools.** When asked to describe their interaction with Blackboard, participants most frequently focused on the system’s content, data storage, and efficiency. Though most instructors mentioned group work and knowledge creation as central to their classroom practices, few mentioned these factors in regards to their pedagogy on Blackboard and none cited them as the central component. Instead, communication to students and administrative tasks like grade distribution were most often mentioned.

Participants most frequently described their interaction with Blackboard as a neutral one, and 47% explained their use was “an aid,” or “redundant” to classroom practices, or even that some of their use was “accidental.” Only one participant described a negative interaction with Blackboard, which they believed resulted in their minimal use of the platform. All fifteen interview participants expressed desire to “do more” or try more tools in their Blackboard course sites either to employ new or different tools, or to simply increase the frequency to which they use the system. Sometimes participants had specific tools in mind they wanted to use in the CMS such as discussion boards and Collaborate, but frequently their desires to use the system more were abstract desires. One instructor explained, “I don’t know all of what’s available.”
When asked to describe the tools they had used in Blackboard, participants again provided a variety of answers. Participants most often mentioned using Grade Center, with twelve out of fifteen participants claiming to use this tool, and discussion board, with ten out of fifteen claiming use. Despite this high rate of use, participants did not always consider Grade Center or “grading” a “tool,” and often had to be questioned if they used that function specifically. Some participants, however, without prompting mentioned that they did not use the Grade Center tool. What features participants considered “tools” sometimes varied as did their awareness of available tools.

SafeAssign, a tool to check for plagiarism, was mentioned by 74% of participants even if they did not use the tool in their course sites. SafeAssign was mentioned by 27% of participants who claimed to not use the tool. Of these non-using instructors, 75% claimed they did not use the tool because it was “redundant” and unnecessary because they were already able to discover plagiarism without it. Instructors who believed SafeAssign to be redundant claimed they either discovered plagiarism through internet searches or their perceptions of students’ writing based on draft work. Those who did use SafeAssign described it as “efficient” or useful. Some instructors who did use SafeAssign, referred to it as “just a check,” or supplementary to their instinctual ability to spot plagiarism. Two participants described using SafeAssign to compare students’ rough and final drafts even though this is not the intended use of the tool. These participants also used the tool to check for plagiarism, but noted that using it to compare student drafts was just as important when considering why they used the tool. These two instructors adapted the tool for a new use and found that use to be an essential one. Instructors described similar augmentations of other tools like discussion board and Collaborate.
Collaborate, the audio-video conferencing tool, was only used by participants who taught online course sections. Though this sub-group of participants only contributed to 20% of total respondents, another 14% of all interview participants expressed desire to learn and use Collaborate in their face-to-face course sections. Though the correlation between online sections and Collaborate use seems to encompass all current use of the tool, no participants mentioned specifically that they did not use Collaborate. No participants who taught only face-to-face sections, unless expressing a desire to use it, mentioned Collaborate when questioned about their use of tools.

Several more tools and functions were used by participants including uploading documents like syllabi, creating assignments, email, announcements, and Collaborate, an audio-video conferencing tool. A breakdown of participants’ tool use can be seen in Figure 2. Few participants used the same combination of these tools, but the use of certain tools often coincided with the use of other tools. All instructors who used the groups tool with their students for projects or peer review also used file-exchange so their students could share drafts and project files with group members. Additionally, all participants who mentioned using external resources including links to videos, tutorials, and websites also uploaded documents or resources they created like syllabi and assignment sheets. Tools that provided similar functions, like those that provide resources for students to reference outside of class or those that encourage discussion and collaboration, were most often used together.
Though these correlations often existed between function and use, the connection was not always present. Participants did not always use tools that are typically thought to “improve efficiency.” For example, participants who used SafeAssign to check for plagiarism, a method they often described as “efficient,” did not always use Grade Center even though those who did also described that tool as “efficient.” Since not all participants described the same tools as “efficient,” tools do not easily fit into this category. The reason instructors chose to use particular tools and not other was not always clear, even to instructors. Often, “efficient” was a designation reserved for tools participants had learned easily and saved them considerable time or effort.

Figure 2. Blackboard tools by participants’ frequency of use
While only 20% of instructors mentioned using email and announcements through Blackboard, a high percentage of those who did not report using these tools referred to “communication” as a central component of Blackboard use later in their interviews. This discrepancy in reporting might imply the use of email and announcements is much higher. Just as participants specifically mentioned not using SafeAssign, 14% of participants mentioned not using email or announcements in Blackboard because they found the tool “redundant” or “unnecessary.” Participants occasionally mentioned other tools they do not use in their courses, however, there was no pattern or repetition of specific tools mentioned. When participants volunteered their reasons for not using these tools they all mentioned “redundancy” or their lack of knowledge of the tools.

Few participants mentioned tools that they would like to implement beyond those they already used. During the interviews, 40% of instructors opened the Blackboard tools menu for reference, because they were unsure what other tools were available beyond those they already used. A screenshot of the menu they referenced can be found in Figure 3. Time constraints, cited by 60% of participants, and accessibility, cited by 40% of participants, were the main reasons instructors did not employ more tools or expand their current Blackboard use. Twenty-seven percent of participants cited the courses’ entry-level statuses and students’ limited abilities to use Blackboard as reasons for their “minimal” or “basic” use of the CMS. These participants who claimed “minimal use” all argued that if they taught higher level writing courses they might use Blackboard more frequently, but did not explain how. Similarly, 20% noted that if they taught an online section of the same course they currently taught, they would use Blackboard “differently” or “more extensively.” Again, participants did not explain how they would use the system differently, only that they would.
### Tools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achievements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announcements</td>
<td>Create and view Course Announcements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atomic Learning</td>
<td>Tool linking to the Atomic Learning website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackboard Collaborate</td>
<td>Schedule and join Blackboard Collaborate web conferencing sessions and view recorded archives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>Create and manage blogs for Courses and Course Groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calendar</td>
<td>Track important events and dates through the Calendar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial Content Tools</td>
<td>Access all Commercial Content tools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacts</td>
<td>Instructors can post contact information about themselves and others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Portfolios</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion Board</td>
<td>Create and manage Forums within the Discussion Board.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups</td>
<td>Create and manage formal groups of students to collaborate on work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journals</td>
<td>Create and manage journals that can be assigned to each user in a group for the purposes of private communication with the instructor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Grades</td>
<td>Displays detailed information about your grades.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portfolios Homepage</td>
<td>Create and manage personal Portfolios and Artifacts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roster</td>
<td>View a list of users enrolled in the Course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send Email</td>
<td>Send email messages to different types of users, system roles, and groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TaskStream Login</td>
<td>Redirects the user to the TaskStream dashboard page.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasks</td>
<td>Use tasks to keep track of work that must be completed. Each Task has a status and a due date.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turning Technologies Registration Tool</td>
<td>Turning Technologies Registration Tool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wikis</td>
<td>Create and manage wikis for Courses and Course Groups.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.** Blackboard 9.1 tools menu

**Reasons for Tool Use.** While participants spent time listing the tools they did or did not use, they also described the reasons they employed these tools or how they used them.

Participants mentioned several reasons for using tools, either in terms of their general use or the
system or in their use of specific tools. Most frequently, participants described their course sites as archival spaces or “bases” where documents, notes, and other resources could be found outside of face-to-face classes. The CMS was mentioned as an archival system by 80% of participants, either for students to access, or as a historical artifact of the course the instructor could refer to when they taught the same class again.

While archiving data was the number one reason mentioned for CMS use, participants also referenced communication needs, simplification of course work or design, and group work as main reasons for their use. Less frequently, participants mentioned a desire or need to teach technology, save class time, or foster students’ independence as reasons for using CMS tools. Though few mentioned these as motivations, more participants referred to student independence when they described what they saw as their students’ perceptions of Blackboard. Figure 4 reveals the frequency to which participants mentioned particular motivations.

Figure 4. Reasons for participants used tools by frequency of use
All instructors who mentioned group work as a motivation claimed use of “groups,” and/or discussion boards in Blackboard. Those who cited “communication” frequently mentioned email or announcement use, but did not always use these features. Instead, some instructors cited posting assignments, class notes, or external resources as a form of communication. Similarly, those who described Blackboard as an archival space listed a variety of tools serving this purpose including external resources, uploading documents, SafeAssign, Grade Center, and discussion boards. Those who cited archiving usually claimed it was their general motivation for all CMS use, unlike those who adopted certain tools for purpose of communication or group work.

Figure 5. Participants’ descriptions of CMS limitations
How CMS Use Reflects Teaching Practices. Over 50% of participants responded that they do not think their CMS use reflected their face-to-face pedagogy. The remaining responses were mixed. Thirty-three percent of participants thought their course sites were likely “similar” to their classroom teaching style, while others “hope[d]” that the two spaces were similar. The remaining participants responded that they “think” or “would like to think” that their teaching practices translated to the CMS environment. No participants responded with confidence that their Blackboard sites were accurate representations of their classroom teaching practices (see Table 10).

Table 10

Participants’ responses on the degree the CMS reflects their classroom practices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>% of total participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitely not</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probably not</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think so</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s similar</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like it to be</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When citing reasons why they did not feel the sites reflected their teaching well, participants most often claimed the limits of the system and time constraints when designing the sites. All instructors who believed their sites were not adequate reflections of their teaching cited at least one of the aforementioned two reasons. When participants listed reasons they felt their teaching was similar in the CMS they most often described the design, organization, or overall structure of their course sites. For participants, these similarities in design often took the form of structures they felt encouraged exploration like many available external resources, or the
inclusion of collaborative elements like discussion boards. Some participants felt that including their resources and assignments in tiered folders reflected the way their course assignments were hierarchical or certain assignments like process work or group activities were part of larger essay assignments. Other reasons participants believed the sites to be representative included an ability to “balance [their] tone” when communicating with students online, or the adaptable nature of their teaching style. Participants did not describe any training they had to translate effective teaching practices online, although approximately 50% described their desire to teach effectively in CMS spaces (see Table 11).

Table 11

Participants’ responses on why the CMS does or does not reflect their classroom practices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why it does</th>
<th>% of total participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Balanced Tone</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure and Design</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptable Teaching Style</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why it does not</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limits of the System</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Constraints</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Changes in Teaching Practices.** While all instructors participating in the interviews taught using the same CMS, Blackboard, they each had different histories teaching in online learning environments. Approximately 40% of instructors had always taught with a CMS. Of all the instructors interviewed almost 50% had used another CMS other than Blackboard, including WebCT, Moodle, Canvas, or university-housed systems. Instructors who had taught without a CMS were asked how their teaching practices had changed since adopting the system. Instructors who had always taught with some kind of CMS
were asked how their teaching practices had evolved with their CMS use, or how they imagine their teaching practices would be different without the CMS. Instructors’ responses were mixed, likely because they had taught for varying lengths of time, anywhere from one to twenty years, and used the CMS at different levels.

Many instructors, regardless of how long they had used the CMS to teach, described their use as “evolving.” Instructors also often described the CMS as a supplement to classroom practices that allowed them to focus more on tasks in the classroom. These responses were reflective of instructors’ descriptions of their tool use with the most common tools being used to supplement classroom instruction. Twenty-seven percent of participants described their teaching practices as not significantly changed by CMS, or, alternatively, unlikely to change if they stopped using the CMS. Though instructors described varying degrees of use, only two (13%), both of whom taught online-only sections, believed the system was a significant part of their teaching practice.

Participants were largely ambivalent about the role of CMS in their teaching practices with most focusing on the ways in which the system made their teaching more efficient. While some described practices that appeared to extend teaching and learning beyond the classroom, like including additional external resources or discussion boards, few believed that their teaching would be significantly altered without these activities. Overall, participants seemed to find the CMS as an extra, but not essential, addition to their face-to-face pedagogy. Instructors did often note that if they taught online-only sections these beliefs might change, but did not feel that their face-to-face sections were greatly impacted.

**Students’ Perceptions.** Participants were asked to consider their students’ perceptions of Blackboard and their course sites specifically. Though these observations were made without
consulting the students directly, instructors were usually able to speak to how they saw their students’ interact with the CMS. Instructors usually based their responses on conversation they had with students in class about Blackboard, questions they received about the site, or responses students gave on their end of the semester evaluations.

Most often, instructors believed students saw Blackboard as convenient. Instructors described students’ interactions with the CMS as one of information retrieval, wherein student-users had an archive of course documents, assignments, and class information. Some instructors, almost 50% of those who claimed Blackboard was “convenient” for students,” also mentioned students’ interactions with Grade Center. While the instructors who mentioned Grade Center all felt students appreciated the presence of this Blackboard tool, their views on how students used the tool was varied. While one instructor mentioned providing students access to their grades could be a motivational tool, another instructor argued that electronic grades feel "less real" to students than paper grades. The second instructor felt that though electronic grades were convenient for students, they carried less impact and were not likely to change students' performance in class. Similarly, one instructor described what they believed was students’ lack ownership of the CMS space. Though instructors seemed confident about what Blackboard tools students used, they seemed less sure about how, or to what frequency students used those tools.

While 60% of instructors believed students’ interactions with Blackboard were ones of convenience, another 40% described students as frustrated by the system. Of those who described student interactions as convenient, 33% also claimed students were frustrated. Reasons for this perceived frustration included: a lack of knowledge (20% of instructors claimed students did not know how to use Blackboard), the system’s design or organization, usage downtimes, and frequent updates or changes made to the system. Some instructors claimed to assuage this
frustration in part by showing students how to use Blackboard, either by providing a “tour” of their course site in class or modeling certain activities for students like writing discussion board posts or turning in assignments. Instructors believed modeling CMS use in the physical classroom improved the likelihood students would use the system and use it for the purposes instructors wanted them to. Instructors who described modeling practices also consistently mentioned their own frustration in doing so, due to the difference between instructor-user and student-users’ “views.” While instructors could model certain activities to students, because their access level in Blackboard is different they could not always show students the same screen or options that would be available in their view.

In addition to perceived convenience and frustration, instructors noticed students used the system in ways they had not expected. Approximately 27% of instructors noticed students used tools, like Grade Center or even uploaded course documents in ways they did not anticipate. Although some instructors noted these creative uses of Blackboard, none of those instructors who observed these new uses mentioned students’ lack of knowledge or the learning curve of the system others described.

A few instructors argued they saw student Blackboard interactions as positive. These instructors, only 14% of all participants, all taught online sections of composition and allowed that this positive interaction might have been out of necessity since all student interaction in the class was online. Another 20% of instructors claimed students lacked or had to develop the ability to work independently in order to use Blackboard successfully. Instructors, once again, did not tend to agree on how students used the system or how positive or negative students’ experiences were.
Students’ Impact on CMS Design. While not all instructors were sure how students used Blackboard, the majority did admit to designing their individual course sites with consideration of student-users. Most instructors used student input when redesigning their course sites. Sixty-seven percent of instructors admitted they used student input to design their Blackboard sites. Of those who admitted to using student input 80% admitted they would change their course design for future sections of the same course and 50% admitted they would change their course design in the middle of the semester to accommodate students. Some of these changes included reorganizing resources into different folders or tabs, or even adding new content like class notes or slides.

Not all instructors felt student input was a significant piece of their course design. Approximately 20% of instructors felt students did not care enough about the design to provide input. Another 14% felt student were likely to provide input but they would only consider making changes to their course site design. While far more instructors were likely to encourage student input in course site design, the majority believed students’ input was often linked to problems or frustrations with the site, rather than ideas to improve the site. Instructors frequently described processes of trial-and-error to solve problems students brought to their attention. Problems most often included students’ issues with course organization, such as problems finding documents or links in folders or tabs.

Significance of CMS in Higher Education. When asked how significant they felt the CMS was to their teaching instructors gave mixed responses. While some felt the system was essential, or at least important to their teaching, other instructors felt it was minimally important or had no bearing on their teaching (see Table 12).
Approximately 33% of instructors found the CMS was essential or “really important” to their teaching practices. Some instructors explained that some of their assignments and activities would not work without the addition of the CMS. Some, about 20% of instructors, explained they felt CMS would play a large role in the future of teaching and would likely improve with time. Others were less convinced the CMS played a large role with 20% claiming it was “not very” significant or had “very minor” impact on their teaching practices. Another 33% of instructors felt the CMS was a “supplement” but not necessarily essential to instruction. These instructors did not see the CMS as influential on their teaching practices, but rather often described it as an easy way to communicate outside of the physical classroom. About 20% of instructors also mentioned they felt the CMS was unlikely or unable to replace face-to-face instruction.

Table 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>% of total participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not important</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No instructors described ways they felt the CMS has altered their teaching practices in or outside the classroom. Instructors, even those who found Blackboard was essential to their courses did not feel the system had impacted their teaching directly.

**Instructors’ Influence on CMS.** Instructors were asked to describe their perceived influence on Blackboard issues, both from a local and global level. This was the portion of the interview were instructors were most in agreement.
Local. Instructors first described how influential they felt they were on Blackboard at a local, that is institutional, level. Approximately 74% of instructors felt they had at least some influence on Blackboard at this level. Instructors most often described positive interaction they had had with specialists in the on-campus information technology department. These instructors also occasionally mentioned experiences they had using tutorials and attending training sessions on campus, although the majority of instructors had not used these services. Teaching assistants and adjuncts were most likely to believe they had “some” or minimal influence, even at the local level due to their employment status or length of employment time at the university.

Global/Corporate. When asked to describe their influence on Blackboard at the global, or corporate level instructors were less inclined to feel their opinions mattered. An overwhelming 94% of instructors felt they had no influence on Blackboard at this level. It should be noted that these same instructors usually noted they “had not tried” to contact or offer input to Blackboard. Typically, instructors explained their position as “minor stakeholders” or “tiny cogs in a big machine.” Both of these phrases were repeated several times during the interview process. Only one instructor felt they had any influence on the corporate level and had previous success offering their opinion at this level.

Description of Blackboard. When asked to describe Blackboard in a word or phrase, instructors were most likely to use one of the terms previously mentioned in the interview like “tool,” “delivery system,” or, slightly less frequently, “enhancement.” Instructors also frequently made reference to the system’s ability to save time and serve as a communication pathway between users. Some instructors used metaphors and analogies to describe how they used Blackboard, including “a little mailbox where we pass notes,” “like my desk,” “a folder,” or even “a protocol droid” in reference to Star Wars.
Observations

Observations, whether conducted during the interviews or through screen capture software, were used to confirm the responses participants gave to interview questions regarding their use of tools and the degree of that use. In contrast to the interviews, however, during the observations participants were more likely to point out specific design elements and organizational decisions they made in their Blackboard spaces. In interviews participants were more likely to describe the tools used, assignments given, and solutions achieved through the use of their Blackboard sites.

Specific elements participants displayed most frequently were methods for organizing data and resources, and the elements they felt customized their sites. Many participants used folders to organize data, beyond the default menu options (“About Your Instructor,” “Documents,” etc.) (see Figure 7). All instructors who were observed showed some kind of folder organization, however, many wondered, in interview observations, if placing documents and resources in various tabs and folders was the best organization method. One instructor
admitted they used to use folders frequently but, upon discovering students had difficulty navigating them, changed organization methods.

Figure 7. Blackboard 9.1 default menu bar

All instructors mentioned some kind of difficulty they had using the default menu options. If they offered commentary on their observation, most mentioned navigating these options was challenging for both them and their students. Most often, problems arose when they tried to distinguish between folders or pages like “Documents” and “Assignments,” or, if added, “Resources” and “External Links.” Instructors had difficulty deciding where certain resources belonged while students had difficulty determining what pages would hold certain pieces of information like assignment sheets.

Instructors often displayed visual elements like color schemes, templates, or personalized headers they included in their course sites. Frequently, instructors called attention to these
elements, even more so than the navigational elements of each site. Instructors did lament that they could not make their sites more “pretty” or unique. Though they did change the colors or organization of the sites, customization did not often go beyond these small changes.

Observations largely corroborated the ways participants presented their tool use and degree of use in the interviews. There were no major discrepancies or unique discoveries in the observation portion. Most often, observation participants used Grade Center and some more of discussion board, which reflects the tools described most often in the interview portion. Observations also highlighted the design challenges and frustrations that instructors described during interviews. While the observations did not provide much unique data on their own, they were able to verify the data collected from interviews.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The Role Blackboard Plays in Teaching Composition

Using interview and observation data from first-year composition instructors at a small, private university in the Midwest, this study describes the relationship that exists between instructors’ pedagogical practices in physical classroom and online CMS-mediated environments. Through application of the results recounted in Chapter 4, in this chapter I discuss the questions addressed by this study and the corroboration of hypotheses.

This chapter will refer to studies described in Chapter 2. A further explanation of those studies can be found in Chapter 2. The research questions and hypotheses responded to here can be found in Chapter 1.

Hypotheses

Though I expected instructors’ CMS use to vary based on their individual pedagogical practices and theories, I also postulated certain patterns would emerge in their responses. Based on research in information technology and composition studies on the role of CMS in higher education, I developed the following hypotheses in response to the aforementioned research questions.

1. Composition instructors’ CMS use does not necessarily reflect their practices in the face-to-face classroom.

2. Composition instructors most often use CMS tools they feel will
   a. improve efficiency and
   b. make teaching and learning easier for themselves and their students.

3. Composition instructors believe they are limited by the capabilities of CMS and therefore:
a. do not adopt many of the system’s tools, and
b. do not use tools they cannot learn to use quickly.

4. Though possible, deeper learning is not often achieved in CMS environments.

5. Composition instructors do not view CMS as significant to successful teaching and learning.

Most hypotheses were confirmed by both interviews with participants and observations of their individual Blackboard course sites. Instructors often described their face-to-face teaching practices in terms that did not reflect the tools they most often used in Blackboard, although most instructors at least attempted to use Blackboard tools effectively, confirming Hypothesis 1. Many instructors, specifically those teaching web-mediated face-to-face sections, disclosed they adopt tools that will help manage their time and fulfill additional course requirements outside the physical classroom, confirming Hypothesis 2. Although all instructors used Blackboard in their courses, they frequently described frustrations they had with specific tools, functions, and design elements that ultimately resulted in their rejection or limited adoption of certain tools. Hypothesis 3 is therefore also confirmed. Additionally, many instructors revealed through multiple responses in their interviews that they did not believe Blackboard was central to teaching composition, or to their students learning. Instructors, despite employing effective pedagogies including discussion and community building in the physical classroom, did not use the CMS to facilitate the deeper learning principles described by Carmean and Haefner (2002) including learning that is social, individual, or student-owned. The doubts instructors had about Blackboard resulted in their inability to achieve deeper learning objectives, thus confirming Hypothesis 4.
Though their responses often demonstrated instructors’ distrust of CMS or minimized its role in teaching and learning, of the instructors interviewed several believed CMS were important tools in higher education either to delivery their courses or to deliver courses in general. Even though instructors may not have used them frequently in their own courses, they sometimes had conflicting beliefs about CMS tools in higher education overall. As a result of these contradictory responses, while Hypotheses 1-4 were confirmed, Hypothesis 5 cannot be entirely confirmed and requires additional study.

Hypothesis 1: Instructors’ CMS use does not necessarily reflect their practices in the face-to-face classroom. The central goal of this study was to determine if practices composition teachers’ used in the face-to-face classroom were reflected in their CMS course sites. Understanding how and why instructors use CMS is of growing importance as the number of web-mediated and online-only course sections offered continues to increase in higher education. Even though using these spaces is already a reality for instructors across the country, and has been for over a decade, effective teaching practices for online spaces are still being developed. As reflected in the responses of instructors interviewed for this study, instructors do not seem to see similarity between the teaching practices they use in physical classrooms and those they use in CMS.

There is debate among scholars in information technology and composition studies as to whether or not technology implemented in the classroom can alter instructors’ teaching practices as well as students’ learning practices. Hawisher and Selfe (1991) argue that existing pedagogies are instead enhanced by technology, while Klem and Moran (1992) contend that technology does not alter the way instructors teach. Often, this debate focuses on the implementation of computer hardware in face-to-face classroom settings, but we must consider a different approach when
discussing CMS adoption. Instead of using technology to supplement or alter the physical classroom, the CMS becomes the classroom, altering the learning space teachers and students interact in. Kember (1997) addresses the importance of space in teaching and learning, claiming though all instructors have a preferred method for teaching that method changes with the demands of different learning environments. The argument that technology is neutral, as presented by Klem and Moran (1992) and, later, Katz (2003), ignores Selfe and Selfe’s (1994) politics of the interface while also minimizing the significant role space plays on teacher and student actions. In accordance with Selfe and Selfe (1994) and Kember (1997), I challenge the assertion that technologies like CMS do not influence teaching practices. Instructors’ interview responses reflected a change in their teaching styles both in the physical classroom and online based on the use of Blackboard. These responses support the argument that technology can and does influence pedagogical practices.

Blackboard’s influence over these pedagogical practices was demonstrated through the responses instructors gave when describing their classroom practices and practices in CMS. In their interviews, many instructors described their face-to-face classroom teaching style in similar terms. Most instructors claimed to use lecture infrequently as a way to introduce concepts and assignments to students. Instructors also favored daily group work and student-centered discussion activities. Due in part to their focus on student-centered activities, instructors often described their physical classrooms as “flipped,” meaning they viewed their teaching role as one of facilitator rather than main possessor and distributor of knowledge. While most held similar classroom pedagogies, the majority of instructors did not use Blackboard in ways that reflected those practices. Most instructors only used Blackboard as an aid or tool to supplement classroom instruction. They most often used Grade Center, SafeAssign, email, and other administrative
tools rather than tools to facilitate online discussion or group activities like wikis, journals, or groups. Though instructors also frequently used the discussion board, many claimed to use the tool most frequently for turning in assignments or brief responses to class activities, and did not require students to interact with others’ posts.

The practices instructors described using in their face-to-face classrooms were strikingly different than those they used in Blackboard. C.R. Payne and Reinhart (2008) conclude Blackboard is frequently used in ways that are instructor-centered rather than student-centered, trending “toward fragmentation individualization, and isolation” (p. 35). This assertion is confirmed by the apparent shift in instructors’ tone and focus from physical to online environments. Though instructors were confident about their classroom practices, they were less confident about their use of Blackboard, often claiming that their course sites were bland, boring, and “definitely [did] not” reflect their teaching philosophy. Instructors agreed that their use did not reflect their face-to-face pedagogy. But why are these pieces of instructors’ practices so different? Instructors who use CMS tools in ways that do not reflect their in-class practices likely do so for multiple reasons:

**Instructors are limited by their understanding of and experience with CMS spaces.**

Instructors often claimed they did not know what tools were available in Blackboard and therefore did not use the system extensively, confirming Blair’s (2010) assertion that instructors’ “lack of technological training” is a major influence when creating course content (p. 74). Several instructors admitted this in interviews while others demonstrated it by their inability to name tools they did not use. Some instructors opened Blackboard’s tool menu and revealed they did not know what certain tools were for or how they would use them in their classes. Not
knowing what tools were available prevented instructors from using Blackboard to its fullest extent.

**Instructors are limited by their understanding of effective online learning practices.**

Instructors not only did not know what tools were available in Blackboard, they were also not likely to know what tools or practices would achieve effective discussion and group interaction. Instructors mentioned students did not often engage in rich discussions on Blackboard and, they suspected, did not check it unless prompted to. The lack of knowledge on CMS design and implementation demonstrated by instructors’ responses confirms Stine’s (2010) position that few are aware of “what works or does not work for online basic writing” (p. 33). Several instructors mentioned discussions in Blackboard spaces were “inorganic” or ineffective in comparison to face-to-face class discussions and, therefore, did not use discussion board spaces at all. Instructors frequently believed access to Blackboard was limited and activities in Blackboard spaces were supplemental to classroom work. While approximately 40% of instructors cited accessibility as a reason for not employing more CMS tools, instructors also frequently believed students would not use Blackboard even if they used it more. One instructor who admitted to using Blackboard only to post syllabi and assignment sheets speculated, “I don’t think undergrads would [check it]. They barely have time to do their own stuff.” Another instructor felt that Blackboard oversimplified instruction, claiming, “Teaching in CMS converts things into binaries: grade or no grade, post or no post. In the individual work within the system there is little nuance.” The assumptions of these instructors suggest Blackboard is inherently less effective than face-to-face instruction, reflecting what Blair (2010) calls a “presumption of loss,” or the belief that online instruction inherently lacks quality and constrains student interaction (p. 72). Instructors’ perceptions of both how to use CMS tools and the instructional value of
those tools limited their frequency of implementation as well as the methods used to implement them.

**Instructors do not view CMS use as part of their pedagogy.** On multiple occasions, instructors described Blackboard as “just a tool” or “a supplement” to classroom instruction rather than as a component of that instruction. Though online-only instructors mentioned ways they used discussion boards and Collaborate to create class communities or facilitate activities, instructors who taught web-mediated face-to-face sections did not consider Blackboard important. Frequently, instructors believed they could teach to the same level of success without Blackboard. These instructors also claimed they only used the system to improve efficiency when performing administrative tasks and to offer students reminders outside of class. This sample of first-year composition instructors may still question the legitimacy and effectiveness of online instruction, not because online instruction is necessarily ineffective, but because effective online instruction is still not the norm. Though they use online spaces, instructors, especially those teaching web-mediated face-to-face sections, are not always knowledgeable about effective pedagogies and the role of CMS. This lack of knowledge among instructors does not reflect a failing on their parts, but rather proves instructors are not as informed about effective CMS use as university administrators implementing the system may expect.

**Instructors teaching web-mediated face-to-face courses do not view their CMS use as online learning.** Instructors who taught web-mediated face-to-face sections claimed they would use Blackboard differently if they taught online-only sections but they could not explain how their teaching would change or what additional tools they would adopt. Their inability to articulate how their pedagogy would be changed by online-only instruction suggests instructors did not have a clear idea of what OWI entails. This would also mean instructors do not see
web-mediated instruction as OWI, even though the CMS is still used to facilitate some elements of those sections. Additionally, instructors who did not teach online-only sections did not view their CMS use as central or significant. One instructor claimed, “That [pointing to the Blackboard site] is not my teaching. This [pointing to themselves] is my teaching.” This divide among online-only instructors and face-to-face instructors shows that instructors are still unsure of what constitutes online learning.

It is clear from instructors’ responses that their practices in Blackboard CMS do not reflect their practices in the physical classroom. These findings confirm not only Kember’s (1997) claims that spaces shape pedagogy, but also Apedoe’s (2005) more specific suspicions that teachers modify their style to fit the CMS. While employing alternative pedagogies for online spaces are necessary and do not suggest poor pedagogy, instructors who lack experience and training in OWI are less likely to design effective CMS spaces. As suggested by instructors’ lack of Blackboard knowledge and limited Blackboard use, if instructors are apprehensive to use the system or do not understand how to, they are less likely to use the system frequently or try new system tools. Instructors who lack this knowledge are also likely to avoid using tools in new ways, such as adapting a discussion board thread for peer review, or using Collaborate for group presentations. Instructors frequently abandon practices they use in the physical classroom due to their perception that CMS are limiting or restrictive without evidence that this is the case. If instructors do not believe the CMS will improve their pedagogy, they will avoid using it, resulting in a limited use that is largely administratively rather than pedagogical motivated.

**Hypothesis 2: Instructors most often use CMS tools they feel will (a) improve efficiency and (b) make teaching and learning easier for themselves and their students.**

During interviews and observations, the tools mentioned by instructors were overwhelming
administrative. Grade Center was the tool instructors most frequently used. While discussion board was also used by a large majority of instructors, most in both descriptions of their use and observation of the discussion board threads they created, used discussion board as a space for students to turn in assignments. Discussion boards were regularly used for short response writing that did not require student interaction or discussion. Despite the tool’s potential for collaboration, this use of discussion board was also administrative since it was a mode of assignment collection rather than a tool to facilitate class discussion or community. Other frequently used tools like email and announcements suggest communication between teachers and students, but, similarly to instructors’ discussion board use, they most often used these tools in administrative ways such as to remind students of upcoming due dates or schedule conferences, rather that promote interaction among class members.

These tools were among the most mentioned because, according to instructors, they saved time and improved efficiency. Instructors also mentioned tools they did not use and felt were redundant because they did not save time. SafeAssign was the tool most often referred to as redundant or a waste of time. Even when particular tools might have improved student success or offered new ways to teach students, as is the case with SafeAssign, if they felt the tool would take too much time to use, they avoided them. One instructor explained they would not use a tool that took them, “more than ten or fifteen minutes to figure out. I don’t have the time or patience.”

Many other participants also set time limits for learning new Blackboard tools. This repeated response suggests that instructors, though they are critical of their teaching practices in the classroom, they are more often concerned with time constraints and attempts to save time for them and their students when teaching in the CMS.
These results on time and efficiency confirm West, Waddoups and Graham’s (2007) findings that instructors most often adopted CMS in order to save time or paper, or to replace previous, outdated technologies like transparencies. While time constraints weighed heavily on most instructors’ minds, I believe these responses again confirm the lack of awareness instructors have about the potential of CMS. If instructors were more aware of the deeper learning that can occur in CMS, as well the practices necessary to achieve deeper learning their reasons for tool adoption likely would be more focused on their possible pedagogical impact.

**Hypothesis 3: Instructors believe they are limited by the capabilities of the CMS and therefore (a) do not adopt many of the system’s tools, and (b) do not use tools they cannot learn to use quickly.** Scholars and instructors repeatedly describe online instruction as more time consuming than face-to-face instruction (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Blair, 2010; Blythe, 2001; Stine, 2010). Although “online instruction” is most often used to refer to online-only courses, the term should also include hybrid and web-mediated face-to-face sections as previously addressed in this discussion. In the case of the instructors interviewed, all were responsible for maintaining Blackboard course sites, even if those sites only held a copy of their course syllabus. Whether teaching online-only, hybrid, or web-mediated sections, instructors consistently spend more time constructing online-spaces and teaching online than if they were only responsible for face-to-face class instruction. As previously addressed, time constraints and questions of efficiency are extremely important to composition instructors.

To combat the time consuming nature of course site design, several instructors described limited Blackboard use, often claiming to set limits of the time they spend on the site. Repeatedly, instructors explained that their decisions to use particular Blackboard tools were based on the time involvement required.
Even though learning to use a system and design a course site influence the amount of time instructors spend in the CMS, these are not the only elements that impact instructors’ time. Student frustration, a challenge mentioned by a majority of participants, is also a constraint on instructors’ time and impacts the degree to which they use Blackboard. Student frustration, addressed by scholars like Posey and Lyons (2011), is a pitfall of online learning that can often prevent instructors from wanting to teach online. Several instructors mentioned during their interviews that students’ frustration and confusion contributed to the design decisions they made in Blackboard. Students’ frustration and confusion also made it necessary for instructors to regularly provide students with walkthroughs or “tours” of their course sites, especially at the beginning of a new semester. Posey and Lyons agree that it is an instructor’s responsibility to help students overcome negative attitudes about online learning, even if that includes demonstrating or modeling system use, but this responsibility is undeniably an added tax on instructors’ time. Despite the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s (2013) mandate that online learning instruction should focus on content rather than technology, instructors are often left with the duty of preparing students to learn in OLE. In first-year composition, where students are typically freshman experiencing the CMS for the first time, this preparation is especially important.

Issues arise when, as Stine (2010) describes, instructors must “[set] an agenda…accept[ing] some priorities while ignoring others” (p. 331). Efforts to design online spaces and demonstrate use of those spaces are political and ethical. Instructors feel obligated to assist students with these issues because often there is little support from others outside the course. Unfortunately, this added responsibility also often leads to instructors limiting Blackboard use, due to the added strain on their teaching loads. When also tasked with teaching
students, in face-to-face sessions in addition to online, grading papers, serving on committees, or, as is the case for adjuncts and teaching assistants, taking courses and working at other jobs, CMS use easily falls to the lowest of those priorities.

All instructors interviewed also addressed issues of access. Whether referring to issues of student or instructor access, all believed accessibility was a factor in the degree to which they used Blackboard and how effective that use was. Discussions of access were usually the most critical moments of the interviews, as instructors mentioned the value of time to both themselves and their students. Often, instructors were troubled by the amount of time they should spend versus the time they do spend using Blackboard in addition to their other duties. Only one instructor, who taught online frequently, felt online instruction was easier than face-to-face instruction, likely due to their ability to recreate previous course sites for new sections of students.

These issues of access and time constraints speak to larger problems of workload and labor practices for composition instructors, especially those in adjunct and teaching assistant positions. Curiously, instructors’ degree of CMS use was not always, or even usually, reflective of their employment position at the university. Responses among were mixed and not consistent in each group (i.e. teaching assistants, adjuncts, and full-time faculty). Despite these mixed responses a few patterns did emerge based on employment level. Typically, instructors who were full-time faculty members felt less stressed by the time they put into designing Blackboard sites than adjuncts and teaching assistants; however these part-time instructors were more likely to claim they spent a lot of time learning Blackboard tools and implementing them in their teaching. Instructors were not asked to quantify the time they spent modifying the Blackboard course
template, however, based on the tools they claimed to use and the ways they described that use, part-time instructors appeared to use more tools, more frequently than full-time instructors.

Part-time instructors were also more to attempt to minimize their role in the adoption and use of Blackboard, even in their own courses. These instructors repeatedly used phrases like “a tiny cog in a big machine” to describe their role in both the university system and the corporate reach of Blackboard. Full-time faculty often at least felt they were influential or important to university level CMS implementation and use, repeatedly mentioning help or training they had received from information technology support employees. Adjuncts and teaching assistants often mentioned they were not sure where to go or who to talk to about Blackboard issues or questions. One instructor explained, “If I want help I’ll probably go to another teaching assistant, rather than professor [or ITS employee]…I’d feel more comfortable [because] they’re all busy.” Many part-time instructors expressed a desire to learn more or be a larger influence on Blackboard use, but were not sure how or had never tried to. The divide between part-time and full-time instructors was present in other aspects of this study, such as the regularity to which part-time faculty required interviews to be conducted in public or shared spaces versus full-time faculty’s requests to conduct interviews in their personal offices. When asked if their teaching was influenced by Blackboard, part-time instructors were more likely to mention they had never used Blackboard before their teaching assignment or did not use it consistently because they had not been trained to.

Bearing the issue of access in mind, comprehensive training for instructors, especially those hired on a part-time or temporary basis, is increasingly necessary. As students begin to recognize the prevalence of CMS in their courses, they will come to expect instructors to use it. Those who are not familiar or comfortable using the CMS will be viewed as luddites, or even
lazy, but students who expect its use. Results of these interviews demonstrated a correlation between the level of training and experience instructors had with Blackboard and the comfort they had using the system. Though often these instructors did attempt to use more tools, they also often abandoned those tools due to time constraints, unfamiliarity, or lack of confidence. If part-time instructors received more training on not only how but also why to use CMS tools, it stands to reason they would use more tools more consistently and effectively.

**Hypothesis 4: Though possible, deeper learning is not often achieved in CMS environments.** If deeper learning is defined as learning that is social, active, contextual, engaging, and student-owned, it is possible but not frequently achieved in CMS like Blackboard. Based on instructors’ responses regarding their tool use, perceptions of students’ interactions, and connection between their face-to-face pedagogy and Blackboard use, and research by previous scholars, deeper learning does not occur often in CMS sites, although, if instructors adapted their face-to-face pedagogies to these sites it would be possible. Most instructors described classroom practices that reflected deeper learning outcomes. If instructors used similar or additional activities to supplement in class practices like peer review, discussion, and collaboration using CMS tools, deeper learning could be achieved in Blackboard. Instructors would need to learn when and why to use particular tools, as well as understand how to adapt their Blackboard spaces to meet individual courses’ goals. In order to critically apply these pedagogies to CMS practice, instructors would require additional training and insight into the role of CMS in teaching and learning.

Despite Kuriloff (2001) and D. Payne’s (2005) declaring otherwise, deeper learning is possible in CMS. Kuriloff’s argument that one size does not fit all, and D. Payne’s depiction of CMS as restrictive are certainly valid and accurate to some extent. Despite the limitations they
describe, however, Kuriloff and D. Payne ignore the restrictive nature of all spaces wherein learning occurs. While limitations of the CMS should be recognized, per the politics of the interface, so should its adaptability and capability. Although it was not common, some instructors did describe using Blackboard to create or enforce community. These instructors typically mentioned using discussion boards to facilitate conversation, groups to conduct peer review, wikis to share knowledge, or file exchange to assist with student group projects. The use of these tools was not common among instructors, especially in comparison to the prevalence of administrative tool use, but their implementation is important to the discussion of deeper learning. Instructors using these tools described using them critically, with expectations that students would share knowledge, take ownership of their learning, and create a community. These expectations are all reflective of deeper learning outcomes, meaning in these few cases deeper learning did occur to some degree.

Although these instructors described what appeared to be successful attempts to achieve deeper learning, it was more likely that instructors described ineffective attempts to facilitate this type of learning. Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2006) find courses that emphasize knowledge creation and collaboration, both tenants of deeper learning, are the courses least likely to be satisfying and effective for students learning in CMS environments. Additionally, if it is assumed instructors’ influence the effectiveness of online learning through factors of course design like interactivity, multimedia quality, and navigability as suggested by Liaw (2008) and Rendahl and Kastman Breuch (2013), it can also be concluded that instructors hold a large amount of power over the degree of learning that occurs in these spaces.

The issue lies in what Carmean and Haefner (2002) call “an understanding of best practice” (p. 33). In order for deeper learning to occur in CMS instructors must have a critical
understanding of the practices employed therein. As previously addressed, instructors did not often feel as though their practices in the CMS reflected their pedagogy or practices in the face-to-face classroom. Instructors also did not feel confident in their understanding of how or why to use particular Blackboard tools. According to Carmean and Haefner’s assertion, these instructors, who self-disclosed not having a critical understanding of best practices, cannot achieve deeper learning outcomes for students in the CMS. Even applying tools that are designed to facilitate community and collaboration, like discussion boards, does not guarantee deeper learning if those tools are applied uncritically. As Rendahl and Kastman Breuch note, instructors’ course design is much more influential on course success than system design. Since, according the Blythe (2001), instructors who implement technology become designers as well as users, their influence is especially significant to achieving these learning outcomes.

The best way to encourage more critical CMS practices is to implement comprehensive training for instructors, especially those unfamiliar with online teaching. Even those instructors who appear to be using the correct tools may not be applying those tools in effective ways. Despite discussion boards being the second most common tool used by participants, they were not always implemented to encourage collaboration or discussion as they were designed to do. The use of the tool alone cannot ensure deeper learning; instructors must also be shown how to achieve similar goals they do in the face-to-face composition classroom through CMS-mediation.

**Hypothesis 5: Instructors do not view CMS as significant to successful teaching and learning.** While the results of this study’s interviews suggest the CMS is an extension of the physical classroom, literature and online learning theory argues it should not be. OLE are unique spaces with unique capabilities and limitations. Many instructors found Blackboard to be more limiting than capable as they often described issues, frustrations, or ambivalence with the system.
Several expressed a desire to use Blackboard to facilitate conversation and community using available tools like discussion board and groups, however, experience and time constraints often led instructors to fall back on the administrative capabilities of the system like Grade Center and SafeAssign. Some of the frustrations instructors experienced, which resulted in their rejection of many CMS tools, likely stemmed from their desire to transfer face-to-face teaching practices directly to the CMS without adapting them for that new space. As expressed in accounts of effective online instruction, OLE cannot be used as stand-ins for face-to-face instruction (Blythe, 2001; Blair, 2010; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Conference on College Composition and Communication 2013). Instead, pedagogies and practices should be adapted to meet the design elements of individual OLE and the requirements of effective online learning, taking into consideration issues of access, community, and knowledge creation. Instructors who lacked extensive teaching experience or training beyond just “how” to use tools in Blackboard were more likely to use fewer tools or believe the system was not significant to their teaching and students’ learning.

Whereas Hawisher and Selfe (1991) conclude technology has the power to enhance existing pedagogies, both good and bad, I find CMS affect pedagogy differently than the computer labs used in their study. Rather than enhance practices employed in their physical courses, instructors often alter their pedagogy in CMS. Though I would argue alteration, or at least adaptation, is necessary for teaching in CMS’s particular spaces, instructors do not always consciously alter their practices. Instead, as both Kember (1997) and Apedoe (2005) suggest, instructors alter their pedagogy for the space or system in question without fully considering how that system impact their instruction. The common alternative to adaptation seen among instructors is rejection. Rejection is especially common among instructors who lack experience
and are, at least somewhat, conscious that their CMS course sites do not reflect their pedagogical beliefs. These first-year composition instructors, when interviewed, were more likely to admit to using fewer tools, presumably because, like Katz (2003) contends, they are uncomfortable with the CMS regulating their practices.

The regulation of teaching practices by CMS like Blackboard raises important questions of the pedagogical freedom held by composition instructors. Instructors were not directly asked if they felt their pedagogical freedom was infringed upon by Blackboard use, voluntary or otherwise, however several of their responses did indicate the importance they placed on their freedom to teach as they saw fit. Pedagogical freedom may have been a subconscious motivation for instructors’ degree of Blackboard use. For example, several instructors mentioned designing and using Blackboard was an added stress and time constraint in their teaching duties. Instructors repeatedly described Blackboard as “just another tool,” or “a supplement” to activities in the classroom. Several instructors also responded defensively to questions of Blackboard’s significance or role in their teaching, arguing their course sites “definitely [do] not” reflect their face-to-face teaching style. The majority maintained Blackboard is not significant or necessary to their teaching, allowing that their practices might change slightly without it, but not enough to matter to their courses’ success.

In some cases, instructors’ rejection of particular tools came across as an act of defiance, perhaps an exertion of freedom over their teaching. Instructors frequently claimed to not use specific tools like SafeAssign or Grade Center, or even Blackboard overall, because they believed those tools were redundant. These instructors felt they already meet their needs with practices or tools outside the CMS, like gut instinct to discover plagiarism, or paper books to keep track of students’ grades. While some instructors simply seemed to avoid spending time to
learn to use these tools, others seemed agitated at the suggestion Blackboard might impose on their practice. Several expressed anger or apprehension toward Blackboard use. One instructor claimed, “[Blackboard] is not about my teaching; this,” pointing to themselves, “is about my teaching.” Others claimed Blackboard is “a pain” to use, or an added stressor for both them and their students.

There appeared to be discrepancy between how significant instructors feel Blackboard is and how imposing or restrictive it is on their individual teaching. Some, while confident Blackboard had not changed their teaching, believed the system was influential to teaching and learning in higher education overall. Others claimed Blackboard is “just a tool;” these instructors, nevertheless, were adamant about the tools they chose to reject, though less passionate about those they implemented. This inconsistency in responses could suggest a few conclusions about instructors’ beliefs.

Instructors might believe Blackboard is neutral in theory, but recognize the potential it has to influence their instruction. Alternatively, some appear to view the CMS as significant to teaching and learning, but see its influence over their personal teaching practices as negligible. One instructor, for instance, claimed to use Blackboard as a “repository” and did not consider the site at the forefront of their teaching, but saw Blackboard’s role in teaching and learning overall as “significant.” Conversely, one instructor claimed their teaching style became “more canned” and less “improvisational” in Blackboard, but felt the system itself was “not super important” to teaching and learning practices. Instructors did not appear to recognize these contradictions in their responses, further suggesting a disconnect exists between how instructor-users view CMS abstractly or theoretically, and how they view the system as it applies to their individual experiences, regardless of their views on either question.
Instructors might also be unwilling to admit the influence Blackboard has over their teaching. If the influence of technology and space over discourse in and use of that technology and space is accepted, as addressed by Selfe and Selfe (1994), it is difficult to presume Blackboard has no influence over instructors’ actions as some participants suggested. Several instructors, even when admitting to high levels of Blackboard use or desire for high levels of use, compared the system to inanimate objects or used metaphors to downplay the system’s importance. Instructors compared Blackboard to office tools like “my desk,” “a folder,” or “a mailbox;” expendable resources like “battle droids” from the Star Wars series; or subconscious actions like “a routine.” One instructor even compared Blackboard to “chalk,” just as Katz (2003) and Boettcher (2003) both do. In each of the abovementioned examples, instructors used comparisons that limit the degree of influence Blackboard has over teaching and learning, and that attempt to separate “the medium” from “the message,” or “the interface” from the use. Consistently, instructors demonstrated they did not see a connection between CMS’s role in education overall and its influence over their individual actions. This contradiction reflects instructors’ tight grip on their pedagogical freedom as well as their fear of losing that freedom.

Due to the contradictions in instructors’ responses, Hypothesis 5 cannot be confirmed or refuted. Although instructors most often believed Blackboard was insignificant to either their personal teaching style or teaching and learning overall, responses did not consistently trend toward a single position. The instructors in this sample have not made up their minds about the role of CMS in teaching composition. It could be that instructors in this group have not used Blackboard long enough to determine how they view its role. Alternatively, as previously recommended, instructors might require additional awareness of CMS and course design to
decide how important these systems are to them. Since I cannot draw a conclusion from the data available, this hypothesis should be studied further with different groups of instructors.

**Future Research of CMS in Composition Studies**

While this study does confirm the results of many other studies, it should still be replicated and expanded upon. First, the study should be replicated in different environments, including public institutions and institutions where instructors have varying degrees of experience teaching online. Institutions with different faculty training methods, like mandatory versus voluntary training or new faculty training sessions, should also be considered. While private institutions typically are less likely to have had CMS for long periods of time, the institution studied here has used Blackboard for over ten years and therefore the results may not be reflective of most private institutions. Recreating the study, or performing a similar investigation at various institutions will allow researchers to determine which results are unique to one institution and which are reflective of composition instruction overall.

In addition to this study’s contributions to research of CMS mediated learning, research should also focus on students’ experiences in OLE. Though this research offers insight into the motivations and experiences of composition instructors, little data was gathered on how composition students interacted and learned with the system. What data was gathered, was based solely on instructors’ impressions of their students rather than first-hand accounts given by students. To understand how students write in CMS, what limitations they see, and how their learning habits are impacted by the system, additional studies should consider collecting first-hand survey, interview, and observation data. First-year composition students learning in online-only, hybrid, and web-mediated face-to-face courses should be the subjects of additional research. Though instructors can provide insight into the processes and practices of teaching in
CMS, only students can truly provide perspective on what it is like to learn in those environments. As students take online-only courses with more frequency, OWI becomes more prevalent, and CMS are ubiquitous as supplements to face-to-face learning, understanding the way those systems alter, benefit, and limit learning is vital to not only shaping system design, but also creating effective, adaptable teaching practices.

Since the scope of online learning is constantly evolving, time is also significant to the importance and relevance of this study. While this particular research provides an insight into one moment of online learning in CMS, it does not necessarily reflect the way online learning will evolve in the next decade. Studies must continue to consider the landscape of online learning, the CMS industry, and the business of higher education. As factors like student and faculty demographics shift and distance and online education become not only prevalent, but in demand, OLE need to be investigated further. Upgrades and updates, as mentioned in Chapter 1, are essential pieces of the twenty-first century. With those upgrades, OLE will change and teaching and learning practices will change with them. Researchers must be vigilant to adapt their study to these changes and avoid becoming entrenched in irrelevant or outdated issues. It is important to accept these digital mediations as realities, rather than bemoan them as tragedies.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Accepting New Practices for Teaching

As OWI rises in prominence and CMS like Blackboard supplement the majority of university courses, instructors, administrators and students must consider the ways online and web-mediated instruction changes higher education. This study does what few have done before. It shines a small light on those changes by questioning the relationship between instructors, online education, and the systems that mediate that education.

While researchers like Dutton, et al. (2004), West, et al. (2007), and Liaw (2008) have considered CMS and OLE through the perspectives of information technology studies, and Hewett and Ehmann (2004) and Conrad and Donaldson (2011) have outlined goals for online instruction, but few have paired pedagogical advice with application to actual instructors’ practices. Fewer have applied these practices to composition instructors, choosing instead to focus on business and science instruction, or attempt to address all course types generally, as Apedoe (2005) and Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2006) argue cannot be done.

This study begins to fill those gaps and combats the assumptions of both Katz (2003) and D. Payne (2005) that CMS are either inherently neutral or inherently malicious. Instead, this study reveals though CMS are capable of reaching Carmean and Haefner’s (2002) description of a deeper learning environment, few instructors have the training or time available to ensure this degree of learning occurs. Understanding that instructors’ pedagogy does impact their decisions to implement CMS tools, and that those efforts to transfer effective practices often fall short, is essential to moving forward with online education research. Whereas the Campus Computing Project (2013) and Allen and Seaman (2013) provide data on IT administrators and the growing number of online courses available, more data is needed on the instructors and students in those
classes. It is time to rethink the concept of stakeholders, to appreciate that instructors and students have the most to lose and gain from online education and therefore they are the stakeholders to focus on in future scholarship.

To call attention to these often underrepresented stakeholders, the interviews conducted in this study focus on the views of composition instructors, including their struggles, perceived limitations, and the significance of CMS in their teaching practices. The interview questions did not focus solely on the tools instructors adopted or their CMS fears. Instead, instructors were asked to unpack their CMS use, describing not just tools but practices they used in Blackboard, as well as the ways they saw, or did not see, their pedagogy reflected in that space. Instructors were asked to offer insights rather than just quantitative responses to the number of tools used without any concept of the context those tools were applied in. Alongside observations of those spaces, this study offers a fuller picture of Blackboard use in the first-year composition course, and an insight into how that use might evolve.

Participants’ responses confirm some of the speculation and apprehension scholars, especially those in composition studies, have about CMS like Blackboard. Many have discussed the restrictions of CMS and instructors’ perceived limitations of teaching online including Kuriloff (2001), D. Payne (2005), and Blair (2010). Even so, it should not be presumed that the results of the study confirm CMS are inherently limiting or that effective pedagogies are unattainable in CMS. The responses given by participants are the direct product of their perspectives. The levels of training instructors receive to teach composition online limits these perspectives. While the Conference on College Composition and Communication agrees effective OWI is possible in an OLE, and outlines the training and practices necessary to achieve that experience, the instructors interviewed in this study appear unfamiliar and untrained in these
practices. More than demonstrate the limitations of CMS, these results confirm instructors should apply the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI) and work critically with CMS to shape policies, training, and practices of online instruction in their programs. It can be concluded that though the knowledge exists, not all instructors possess it. Instead, instructors are often frustrated, hesitant, and more likely to reject CMS tools than struggle to implement them without guidance how to do so.

In addition to the need for more comprehensive training specialized for composition instruction, these results demonstrate the need for more open dialogues about all OLE, including their features and significance in composition instruction. Though all participants in the study used Blackboard in their first-year composition classes to some degree, very few felt the system was necessary or even important to instruction. Similarly, few saw a connection between the teaching practices they employed online and those they employed in face-to-face classes. Though some instructors wanted to apply similar pedagogical practices and theories in Blackboard, few comprehended the overlaps and deviations of their face-to-face and online instruction in terms of the activities, assignments, or assessments presented in each space. Most either tried to recreate their face-to-face classroom pedagogy in Blackboard without adapting it for a new space, or abandoned that pedagogy entirely in favor of more administrative functions like grading and delivering content. Instructors were not likely to see the unique design of the CMS that blends both distance and face-to-face learning practices (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2013; Harasim, 1990; Posey & Lyons, 2011). Instructors, because they were unaware of these distinctive features, did not adapt their teaching practices to match the new space. Very few instructors felt confident and satisfied with their online course
design, regardless of if they taught online-only, hybrid, or web-mediated face-to-face course sections.

In light of this lack of confidence and difficulty applying online pedagogical practices, Blair’s assertions are confirmed. More training must be implemented to not only show instructors how to teach online, but why to teach online. Expecting instructors to know why and how to use particular tools in CMS with the little training they receive is unrealistic. Just as understanding the inner workings of a camera does not a skilled photographer make, understanding how to create discussion board threads and join Collaborate sessions does not necessarily lead to critical, effective online instruction. A photographer must understand both how to operate the camera and how to compose a well-balanced image. Instructors’ understanding of CMS should be similarly well-balanced. Instructors must also be encouraged to think critically and reflectively about their teaching practices both face-to-face and online. Composition instructors need to feel comfortable discussing CMS and addressing the issues they have teaching in those spaces. Simply rejecting CMS or reproducing face-to-face instruction online are not sustainable practices in the advancing world of education.

This study should be replicated and adapted for instructors with diverse faculty who both do and do not have experience teaching composition online. Institutions where instructors undergo different levels of mandatory and voluntary training, where institutions have new or well-established CMS programs, and institutions with few and many online writing courses offered should also be studied. Recreating a similar investigation in those settings will help determine what common frustrations and techniques instructors have when translating composition instruction to a CMS, and what experiences are unique to particular institutions.
In addition, more research must be done into the ways students learn online. CMS, as the most common OLE for students at higher education institutions should be focused on whenever possible. Though more generalized studies of online learning can be valuable, the significance of the particular interface students use to access their courses should not be underestimated. Additionally, studies of students learning online should not be limited to those enrolled in online-only courses. Certainly, as Allen and Seaman (2013) note, online-only courses are growing in popularity, but these are not the only courses where students learn online. Students enrolled in face-to-face course sections are increasingly reliant on supplemental course sites. Faculty, in turn, have increased and will likely continue to increase their use of supplemental online spaces to teach. Students in hybrid or face-to-face courses are not always considered in discussions of OWI, but as the landscape of learning and practice of teaching changes, so must our definition of online learning.

While I believe this study speaks to the current state of composition instruction in CMS mediated environments, I also know these learning spaces are constantly evolving. A vigilant focus on research, practice, and training is necessary to ensure composition instruction remains effective for all learners. While it may be easier to ignore or disparage CMS, they are unlikely to disappear from university campuses anytime soon. Designing unique, externally hosted course sites may be enticing to instructors who want to take advantage of online learning while rejecting the CMS, however this practice is not easier and is nearly impossible for teaching assistants and adjuncts’ time limited schedules. It is my argument, despite the imperfection and possible constraints of the CMS space, that the solution is not rejection or blind acceptance. Instead, instructors must stretch the possibilities of the CMS beyond its expected use to include new practices for teaching.
References


**Glossary**

**Blackboard**: A course management system (CMS) most widely used in higher education as well as the system studied in this project.

**Blended course**: Also known as hybrid, this course type uses both face-to-face and online instruction, often including the use of online conferencing software, to deliver assignments and conduct discussions.

**Course management systems (CMS)**: Online learning environments commonly used by institutions of higher education to support digital course materials, student performance tracking, data storage, and communication tools between instructor- and student-users.

**Course sites**: Web pages commonly found in online learning environments like course management systems that are often built from predesigned course templates or shells. Instructors have access to edit content within the site for students to access within a particular course section.

**Face-to-face course**: Sometimes referred to as a traditional course, this course type conducts class sessions in a physical environment. These courses are becoming a less common at institutions of higher education in favor of web-mediated, blended/hybrid, and online-only.

**Facilitator**: Used here to refer to an instructor or other content developer, facilitators mediate online learning environments, including designing course sites and implementing digital tools.

**First-year composition (FYC)**: Also commonly referred to as first-year writing, this sub discipline consists of general education courses required for university students, usually to be taken during the first year of enrollment.
**Hybrid course:** Also known as a blended course, this course type uses both face-to-face and online instruction, often including the use of online conferencing software, to deliver assignments and conduct discussions.

**Information technology (IT) studies:** A discipline that studies and implements computer-based systems including hardware and software.

**Interface:** A system component that allows users to interact with that system using visual, textual, oral, and aural components.

**Learning course management systems (LCMS):** An extension of a course management system or learning management system used to create learning objects and content as well as track student progress throughout their careers rather than in a single course.

**Learning management systems (LMS):** Similar to a course management system, these online learning environments include systemic features like the ability to transfer data between course sites and communication between users who may not have access to the same course sites.

**Online learning environments (OLE):** Any online space that facilitates or mediates learning, such as course management systems and learning management systems.

**Online writing instruction (OWI):** The practice of teaching writing or composition using online technologies including, but not limited to, a course management system.

**Online-only course:** This course type uses online instruction exclusively, most often implementing an online learning environment to deliver content, conduct discussions, and maintain user data. Users meet synchronously, via online conferencing software, or asynchronously, to accommodate users’ schedules.
**Pedagogical practices:** Used here to refer to any elements of an instructor’s teaching, these practices can including assignments given, classroom activities, standards for communication with students, and assessments.

**Web-mediated course:** This course type meets face-to-face and does not require online instruction, but uses an environment like a course management system to deliver content, maintain grades, or otherwise supplement and enhance classroom instruction.
Appendix A

First-Year Writing Course Sequence

This appendix will describe the first-year writing courses taught at the university used in this study. These explanations will include course descriptions derived from the university’s course information packet as well as requirements for enrollment in those courses.

In Fall 2014, out of the approximately 2700 total undergraduate students at the university 925 students were enrolled in a first-year writing course. In Spring 2015, 647 students were enrolled in one of these courses. Students at this university are enrolled in over sixty-five unique majors in the Colleges of Business, Education, Health Professions, Liberal Arts, Pharmacy, and Sciences.

Pre-Requisite Writing Course

The pre-requisite writing course at this university is “College Writing I: Introduction to Academic Writing.” In Fall 2014, 345 students were enrolled in this course. Students who do not meet a predetermined ACT score for reading must also enroll in “College and Professional Reading.” Approximately 150 students were enrolled in this reading course in Fall 2014. In Spring 2015, 63 students were enrolled in College Writing I, with 45 of those students also enrolled in College and Professional Reading. In Spring 2015, 16 students were enrolled in the tutorial version of College Writing I.

Course Description. This course “emphasizes writing processes appropriate for narrative, analytical, and argumentative essays. The course helps students to express their own ideas in lively prose that conforms to conventional standards of style and usage. Some of the writing assignments will require responses to assigned readings or other texts (potentially including non-print media), but the focus throughout most of the course remains on each
student’s expression of his/her own ideas. Students are placed into this course by the English faculty” (Course Information Packet). A special version of College Writing I, a tutorial version of the course is offered for students who have previously attempted but not passed College Writing I.

**Prerequisites.** There are no prerequisites for College Writing I, but College and Professional Reading can be required as a co-requisite.

**First Writing Requirement Course**

The first writing requirement course at this university is College Writing II: Research and Writing. Students enroll in College Writing II after either completing College Writing I or achieving an acceptable score on required sections of the ACT. Approximately 284 students were enrolled in College Writing II in Fall 2014. In Spring 2015, 304 students were enrolled in the course. One student was enrolled in the tutorial version of this course.

**Course Description.** “This course introduces students to writing processes and prose conventions common to many academic disciplines, and it provides opportunities for students to participate in one or more of the ongoing conversations in particular communities of writers. The course emphasizes analytic and persuasive writing based on critical reading of nonfiction prose from both primary sources (interviews, surveys, archival research, etc.) and secondary sources including articles/texts found in scholarly databases. In addition, non-print texts may be examined and/or composed. Two systems of formal documentation, MLA and APA, are covered” (Course Information Packet). Two special versions of College Writing II include:

- An advanced version of College Writing II, with more challenging writing assignments.
- A tutorial version of College Writing II, for students who have previously attempted but not passed College Writing II.
Prerequisites. To enroll in College Writing II, students must meet at least one of the following requirements:

- Reading competency (an ACT Reading score of 21 or higher, or a SAT Verbal score of 590 or higher) or successful completion of the College Reading course, and one of the following: a combined ACT English and Reading score of 50 or more (with at least a 21 on the Reading section) on the most recent ACT attempt on record from the Office of Admissions, earning an SAT Verbal score of 590 or more; or completing College Writing I or College Writing I Tutorial (or receiving equivalent transfer credit); or earning a score of 3 or 4 on the AP English Language and Composition Exam.

- Students with scores of at least 30 on both the Reading and English section of the ACT or a 620 or higher on the Verbal section of the SAT may be invited to enroll in College Writing II Advanced from the English. Enrollment is not required, but encouraged.

- Students are eligible for College Writing II Tutorial (a course taken to repeat College Writing II) if they receive a no credit in the most recent attempt to complete College Writing II.

Second Writing Requirement Courses

The second writing requirement courses at this university vary. Course titles include:

- Writing and Literature
- Introduction to Technical Communication
- Introduction to Writing for Sciences
- E-Rhetoric and Writing
- E-Literature and Writing
- Advanced Writing
All second writing requirement courses emphasize improving student writing and are typically taken by students of freshman or sophomore rank. Special topics in these courses vary by section. Faculty members alternate teaching these courses, meaning that a course, Writing and Literature for example, is not always taught by the same faculty member or members. Students are able to select their second writing requirement course based on their personal interests or their major of study. As a result, students in professional or science based majors frequently choose courses like Introduction to Technical Communication or Introduction to Writing for the Sciences. All courses are open to all students regardless of major, however, which means students from multiple colleges and disciplines are often enrolled in the same course section.

In Fall 2014, 296 students were enrolled in second writing requirement course sections. In Spring 2015, 264 students were enrolled in second writing requirement course sections.

**Course Description.** Course descriptions for these courses vary by course number, section, and instructor.

**Prerequisites.** In most cases students must complete College Writing II to enroll in a second writing requirement course, however, students may enroll before completion of this credit with permission from the second writing requirement instructor, subject to the discretion of the English Department.
Appendix B

Data Collection Materials

This appendix will provide the materials necessary to replicate this study. Appendix materials include emails used to recruit participants and an interview protocol.

Recruitment Process

The recruitment process was regulated in part by the university’s Institutional Review Board’s policies and common practices. I used wording and resources provided by the IRB to create my own study documents including recruitment emails and consent forms. The following email was sent to potential study participants currently teaching in the first-year writing program at the university used in this study:

Dear [Composition Faculty Member],

My name is Lauren Salisbury and I am a second-year Master of Rhetoric and Writing student at the University of Findlay. Currently, while working on my master’s thesis, I am researching the ways in which composition faculty members’ pedagogical styles are reflected in their use of course management systems, or CMS, like Blackboard and Moodle.

As part of this research, I am conducting interviews with first-year composition faculty members. It is my hope that these interviews will aid in not only my understanding of current pedagogical practices in CMS, but will also provide the field of rhetoric and composition with a clearer picture of the ways that composition instruction is impacted by this use of technology.

The goal of this study is to investigate and answer the following questions:

- To what extent do pedagogical practice and concepts of teaching influence an instructor’s use of a CMS?
• To what extent are instructor’s concepts of teaching translated to the CMS environment?

• To what extent do composition instructors feel they influence the CMS and its use in the university setting?

The interview consists of questions related to the above research questions. The interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete.

A secondary component of this study will be an observation of faculty members’ interaction with the Course Management System. This observation will be conducted through a screen capture and will be used to understand the way that instructors build course sites and the tools they use most frequently. This observation will take less than 60 minutes to complete.

Participating in one aspect of the study does not require your participation in another. For example, you may participate in an interview, but elect not to complete an observation. Participants are welcome to complete both if they so choose.

All of your replies will be private and you will not be identified by name as a subject of our study. Participating in the interview or observation is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. You will be asked to sign a consent waiver that has been approved by The University of Findlay Institutional Review Board, which guarantees that research involving human subjects follows federal regulations. The IRB chair is [contact name]; and they can be reached at [IRB contact email]. You will be made aware of any information that varies from what has been provided to you and/or might affect your willingness to continue to participate in the project.

As a benefit of this study, participants will be given the opportunity to reflect on their pedagogical decisions, both inside and outside the Course Management System. They also have
the opportunity to learn more about the ways the program uses the course management system as a whole. The contribution to the ongoing conversation regarding technology use in the first-year composition classroom should also greatly benefit participants.

If you would be interested in participating in either an interview and/or an observation, or if you have further questions about the study please contact me at [email address] and [phone number] or my thesis chair, Dr. Ronald Tulley, at [email address] and [phone number].

Sincerely,

Lauren Salisbury

Master of Rhetoric and Writing Program

The University of Findlay

Interview Protocol

An interview protocol is provided in Table 13. The protocol includes interview questions; the approximate time spent answering each question; and relevant research questions. Each interview question corresponds to at least one research question. Research questions include:

1. To what extent do pedagogical practices and concepts of teaching influence instructors’ use of CMS?

2. What face-to-face classroom practices do instructors use in CMS and what practices do they abandon?

3. How are instructors’ face-to-face pedagogical practices influenced by their CMS use?

4. How do instructors perceive students’ experience of the CMS and how do those perceptions impact instructors’ design and facilitation of CMS spaces?

5. How do instructors interact with CMS and how significant do they feel that interaction is to their teaching practices?
Table 13

*Interview protocol*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Approx. Time Used for Question</th>
<th>Related Research Question(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe your pedagogical style in the face-to-face classroom)</td>
<td>&lt;10 minutes</td>
<td>1, 2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe your interaction with the course management system (CMS) (Blackboard)?</td>
<td>&gt;5 minutes</td>
<td>1, 2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What CMS features or tools do you regularly use in your classes?</td>
<td>&lt;5 minutes</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What features or tools do you only occasionally use or use in some of your classes? Alternatively: What tools have you tried and rejected?</td>
<td>&lt;5 minutes</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are your greatest struggles, frustrations, or perceived limitations with using CMS?</td>
<td>&gt;5 minutes</td>
<td>2, 3, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your pedagogical style well reflected in your CMS sites? Why or why not?</td>
<td>&lt;5 minutes</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has your teaching style changed since using CMS? Alternatively: Would it change without CMS?</td>
<td>&lt;5 minutes</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you perceive students’ interactions with the CMS? How do they use it and how do they feel about it?</td>
<td>&gt;5 minutes</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How significant are CMS to the learning-teaching process?</td>
<td>&gt;5 minutes</td>
<td>1, 3, 4, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which of the following best describes the CMS in your opinion: tool, delivery system, or enhancement?</td>
<td>&lt;5 minutes</td>
<td>4, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How significant is your input as an instructor and your students’ input when it comes to designing or re-designing the CMS?</td>
<td>&gt;5 minutes</td>
<td>4, 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Interview Transcripts

This appendix includes written transcripts from two participant interviews. Each transcription was produced from an audio recording of the interviews.

Notes about Interview Transcript Notations and Breaks

Participant responses are noted with a “P” designation. Researcher questions and prompts are noted with a “R” designation. For example:

R: Could you describe your teaching practices in the face-to-face classroom?

P: In person, I teach using mostly group work, in class activities, and writing workshops.

Any pauses in responses will be noted with “[pause].” Any other notations that are not quotations from participants will be included in brackets. For example, “[laughs]” might be included to note sections where participants laughed during the interview.

Paragraph breaks and sentence breaks were made when there was a natural pause in the speaker’s speech pattern or when the speaker changed subject.

Interview times and locations, as well as participant names have been removed to protect the anonymity of participants. Similarly, any identifying statements have been removed with the notation “[redacted]” in its place. These statements might include previous places of employment or comments that would otherwise clearly identify the participant.
Interview Transcript 1

Researcher: How would you describe your pedagogical style in general in a face-to-face environment and what kind of assignments are you using? What’s your focus?

Participant: Yeah. So I’m just going to kind of be who I am during this interview.

R: That’s fine.

P: So, for example, as we talk I like to narrate with notes. So, I can’t stop myself.

R: That’s fine. [laughs]

P: I use this with my students in a one-on-one a lot and this is kind of a map for our conversation. They get to keep these, so you’ll get to keep them too. But they kind of self-destruct. Use them for your notes if there’s anything useful, but just put it in your own words because like two weeks after the interview you would be like, “What? I have not idea why there is a starburst of question marks there,” even though it makes perfect sense now.

R: Right.

P: Who I am as a teacher… I’ll tell you a secret, which is who I am as a writer is very close to who I was as a teacher as an undergrad at [redacted]. I was a Writing Center tutor, so I worked in the Writing Center there. It was a little bit different. We had just started a mentoring program there, so they had tutors in the Writing Center and they had tutors embedded in the classroom. I was embedded in the class, attending a class that I had already taken with a professor I had rapport with. When students handed in a draft I read it first, commented on it, met with the students, they revised, gave it to the instructor, he graded it, I got to look at those papers first to see his comments and grades…I bet that’s a violation of FERPA laws now…and then students got them. And it got me very deep into teaching. And who I am now in many ways is a writing center tutor.
There’s an Albert Schweitzer quotation that says, “Experience isn’t the best teacher, it’s
the only teacher.” I think that my pedagogy is very writing based and it’s very one-on-one, which
is hard to teach a class of twenty one-on-one. There are huge flaws to this system. There are huge
flaws in this system, mostly based in my time and sanity. But this is, for me, the best way to
teach. And not just me tutoring the students, but teaching the students to tutor each other
peer-to-peer. So it’s very writing driven, and there’s a lot of scaffolding in their writing process.
I’m process oriented. I’m collaboratively oriented. And I’m peer review oriented. And that’s sort
of the first thing I learned and that I have gone with. Because the truth is…I was a clever student.
I had, at one point in my undergraduate career invented for myself—like no one intervened! I’m
sure people wish they had. But I made a rule that I had to count to ten before I would talk in
class, because otherwise I was always the shiny penny with my hand up first. And I realized that
was probably not the best learning environment for my peers. So, already, I was thinking about
pedagogy from a peer-to-peer level. And so, I like lecturing and if I could I would just be the
person: “Here are all my thoughts.” I think in pedagogy circles, there’s a lot of “No lecture!
That’s terrible! We’re going to be the ‘guide on the side’ not the ‘sage on the stage.’”

I think that’s right, but not 100%. I mean pedagogy is a lot of fashion trends. I try to keep
my ear to the ground, listen to what they are, take what I like and leave the rest because I think
there is something very important to lecture. The component that I like is exposing students to
my thought process as a modeling practice. So that’s a scaffold for them. Just like, “We’re going
to do this thing. I’m going to do it first, in front of you. Then we’re going to do it together, and
do it together, and do it together, and you’re going to practice, you’re going to practice, you’re
going to practice, you’re going to practice.” Because I think they need a lot of practice.
Otherwise, TED talks wouldn’t be so popular, right, if lectures were totally out of style. But I
think the scaffolding needs to be there for them. There’s that. And I think too that good teaching has to be very context driven, and I like to pay attention to those contexts so that I am highly aware that my students come in deeply traumatized and misinformed by their previous learning experiences, especially when it comes to writing.

And here too, when I was hired I was hired mostly to teach the first and second level writing requirement. Which is honestly where I like to be pedagogy-wise, because to me writing is…I think to myself “writing is the only,” and I strike it through, “best” and I strike it through, but then I put “major, super-duper important way to learn.” Not the only way to learn. But one of the best. And one of the best ways for me to teach them how to learn. So students come in traumatized. They have lots of bad habits when it comes to writing and I have to teach them to put those processes behind. You know: Pick a thesis; drive it like it’s stolen. Don’t care about it. Write for forty-five minutes. Put it down. Never look at it again. Walk away. Fake your way through an answer. Psych out the instructor. Figure out what they want. It doesn’t matter what I actually think or care or feel, I just have to get this grade and jump through their hoop. It’s really…it’s terrible. So, I think my role in this is digging away some of that terrible muscle memory. And some of it I can’t fight.

Like in [College Writing II], it’s a super overscheduled class. It’s way too much work. It’s too much work and too much learning for one semester. They’re just swamped. You can’t cover that much material. When I taught [second writing requirement course] for the past few semesters now, they write one major paper and they revise it almost all semester. And they really like it. Because that’s where I can…I teach them how to connect claims and evidence. And if my claim is you need to write and revise your work, then I need to take them through very slow revisions and skills on how to do that so they have it. That’s where the rubber meets the road. I
find they need the kind of muscle memory to do the same kind of exercises over and over again to get better at it. And layering metacognition where they have to think about their own writing it part of that.

So, that’s important. And I’ve also learned as an instructor some of my growth has been around social pressures. [laughs] Which is, I try to make “bad learning” as awkward as possible. Socially awkward. And I try to make good learning practices the default. I try to make it explicit and built into my class. One of the things that I’ve learned is that I can never tell them enough why we’re doing the things we’re doing. I can never tell them enough. And if I think I’m being repetitive and losing them, I should probably tell them three more times what we’re doing and why. Because otherwise they don’t get it and if I repeat it enough they understand it. For example I was just reading through my course evaluations for [second writing requirement] and it’s the difference between claims and evidence. They can’t bullshit their way through this: “I’m much better at making connections between claims and evidence.” “I liked [redacted] exercises.” And they say, “I really like [redacted] exercise.” So they liked these specific exercises enough for them to become mental tools that they go to immediately. It’s part of who they are, rather than just do it and keep writing. So there’s a kind of practice that I think is very useful and it makes it hard to grade. It’s a lot of grading.

So that’s where social awkwardness comes in. I like lecture. I know that their learning is not dependent on what I do in class, but what they do in their work on the most fundamental level. Writing taught me that. As a graduate student I made what I thought was a gorgeous sequence of assignments. They had a book chapter they had to read in Writing Analytically, I had them do an assignment, I read it and I looked ahead and I thought, “They are not going to be able to do that on their own. It’s too complex, even if the book is walking them through it.” And so I
made a handout that took it through the process more slowly and we did it in class together and we had a beautiful discussion and everyone is contributing and I think I’m the cleverest instructor in the whole wide world and then for homework they had to go home and do it on their own. And I got those assignments back and I read through them and it was a train wreck. They could not do it on their own. They could not, could not, could not. They were totally back to summary. Absolutely no analysis, no development. Like bird bath shallow. And I had seen them do it so I thought they could. And they could do it in discussion but they couldn’t do it in writing. So it hadn’t gotten to be part of who they were. I had to scratch lesson plans. It was terrible.

What a disaster. I had to push it back because I had to be like, “Here guys. We’re going to look through this body of work.” It was an ungraded assignment. “Here’s where you all are falling down. Look at it. Look at it. Look at it. Look at it. I’m asking you to do X. You’re not doing X. You’re on C. Here are these back. Do it again. We’re going to.” And that’s where writing became key to me, because I thought, “Oh. I taught you up to the point where you could sort of fake it ‘til you make it. You were at sort of a journeyman’s stage and when I asked you to show me mastery you couldn’t.” And that class discussion was so beautiful. They’re having “aha” moments and they’re teaching me things, and I had thought I was so clever up to that point with anticipating their mistakes and whatnot. We left that room just ready to pat ourselves on the back, right? But they didn’t have it at the writing level of mastery and I would never have known that if I hadn’t asked them to show it to me in their writing. And that was awkward for me. And I think so socially awkward [laughs]…For me it was awkward to be like “Look guys, that discussion was great. You don’t have it. I’m sorry. Let’s go back.” But socially awkward for them…I have them memorize each other’s names. And I quiz them on it. And they make a name tent. And if they say anything like, “That’s what she said,” I say, “No. You call that person by
their name. You’re sitting next to them.” But I know from evaluations they really appreciate it, because it is really hard being in a peer review group with someone you sat next to for six weeks and “I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.” So, I have them do exercises and I go around the room and I mark them as on time complete. Some of them guff because I might get ahead of myself and I forget to mark them or whatnot. I don’t take big points off for “incomplete,” but it’s the social awkwardness of for five seconds I’m going to stand over your shoulder, I’m going to look at your work, and I’m going to mark whether you did it or you left parts blank. They do the work. That five seconds interaction is too awkward to not do the work. If I don’t do that, they won’t do the work. They won’t. And they piss each other off. I see it in my evaluations. I was laughing at one where someone said, “People are watching too many horse videos on their laptops!” And what I love is I scan my evaluations and then I build them back into the next class. When I tell them about appropriate class behavior, I’ll be like, “Your peer wrote this! That’s not me. Don’t do it!” Because I will fuss at you if I walk behind you and see that you’re on Facebook because you’re on task. But I’m not going to take this tool away from you because some of you are naughty on your laptops.

Anyway that’s question one. [laughs]

Central to my pedagogy is writing. And I guess some of it, I didn’t say it directly, is a deep sympathy I have with my students. I think compassion has to be part of it. I say this to them very explicitly, which is, the tools I give them: I’m a writer. They’re a writer. And we are only different in degrees, but no kind. I may be a professor, but I don’t have writing magic. Right? I never sit down and it’s not like, “Well! Writing’s easy for me!” All the tools I give them are tools I use as a writer. I give them this little bit that’s in my office and I turn it into a handout where they have to interview themselves. It’s about writing and procrastination. I give them a
blank version with the thought rebuttals and so they have to own up to which is there’s. I tell them which are mine. And they have to write their own rebuttals and then I give them the actual rebuttals. These are ninja level skills. Like black belt rebuttals. They write, “I just have to do it.” And I’m like, “You will not power through it if guilt is your only answer.” So when I tell them about peer review, when I give them that writing scaffolding, then it’s about having them see themselves as a writer like I am, and remembering that I’m a writer like they are.

[redacted identifying personal anecdote]

Students see my process as an option for theirs and not the only option. And that helps.

R: OK. That was one. So that second question then, is to have you describe your interaction with Blackboard and if your experience is mostly positive, negative, enriching, distracting...

P: Yeah. Well I used [university name redacted] had their own course management system called [name redacted] that they built in house. They have now switched to Blackboard. So, I was using course management systems since the first time I taught a class. I’m pretty native to it and I find when I look at other people’s use of course management systems mine is very muscular. And that’s not always the case. I find some people and I’m like, “Whoa! You’re doing what?” And the English department here is really clever and smart when it comes to their use of course management systems. This place is a powerhouse of course management systems that leaves me a lot to learn, which I’m grateful for.

And I think it is positive and negative, enriching and distracting. I used to train other graduate students to teach with technology and I have never used any kind of technology tool because I thought it was cool. I am a late adopter when it comes to technology because unless it is meeting a need that I can’t fulfill or that I can’t fulfill as well then I’m not going to adopt it. And even though I’ve had my students do multimodal projects, find things on Blackboard, blah
blah blah… I have never done anything, with one exception, that made my students go, “Wow! Technology!” At [institution name redacted] they had some classrooms that I requested that had doc cams in the ceiling so I would take a piece of paper and turn on the screen and turn on the doc cam and say, “I’m going to annotate this poem in front of you now,” or “We’re going to annotate this poem and what you write down I’m going to put on this paper.” Mostly it was, “I’m going to give you feedback on your paper in front of you.” They liked seeing their stuff on the big screen. It gave them a kind of jazz from that but no other technology. I will never impress my students with my use of technology. Because either they expect it or they’re better at it than me. So there is zero whiz-bang pay off. Maybe for other people who are better. [laughs] Not for me.

I like to use a course management system to reach more students. It helps me reach students for a variety of reasons. If I have anxious overachiever students, then they are very happy to be on Blackboard and monitor it closely. “Is it on Blackboard? Can I see it? Phew.” I find that they are much more peaceful if they have the kind of autonomy that says I can find that on Blackboard. I also have students who are taking the class because it is a requirement and they do not care and they may or may not show up. And they might loop back into the course. “I didn’t go on Tuesday. It’s Thursday. I might have to start paying attention.” And they can silently creep on Blackboard. So, I think a lot of the benefit of a course management system is something I can’t capture, because they’re doing a lot of creeping. And they’ve grown up creeping online. And so, hooray.

But I also can just dither around on it now. It takes a lot of time to build a course management system. Sometimes I live in a fantasy world where it doesn’t exist and I don’t feel obliged to use it and I’m just like, “See you next class! I wrote it on the chalkboard!” People learned then too! Here, for example, is the exit interview sign up sheet which I scanned as a PDF
so now they can download it and find out what time they signed up for when they lost it even though I said write this down on the handout where I made the space for you to write down. I still get emails that say, “What time did I sign up for?” But I get those less. And they do piss me off. I tell them that so they’re not surprised. “If you ask me a thing I have told you on Blackboard that’s showing me you’re having poor organizational skills and need help.”

And I like it because students email me. I’m pretty approachable. And if they ask a question I’ll build an FAQ about an assignment sheet, which is really nice because they’ll ask me very good questions about an assignment. “Oh, I thought we went over that.” Or, “Oh, my directions were unclear. You’re asking a perfectly reasonable question that anyone reading this document would have.” And I add it to the FAQ.


R: So you’ve kind of already alluded to some of the tools that you’re using. It sounds like a lot of uploading documents that you’ve talked about in class already, but what other tools are you using either frequently or occasionally?

P: Yeah! So, we’ll just scroll through and you can see. So this is the class. I have a lot of functionality turned off that I don’t use at all. So they have announcements and I’ll email them. And I try to listen to them. I hate chasing my students. They really seem to enjoy being chased. So, I need to figure this out with the Blackboard folks but there’s a way they can turn on alerts on their phone so whenever I make a change they get an alert on their phone. I did not know that! And I was like guys I am going to stop making changes at like 10:30 at night because I do not want your phone to ping because I’ve uploaded something to Blackboard and you think, “Oh it’s a sweetheart…Aw! That assignment is due!”
It’s mostly here in assignments and discussion that I work. And it’s summary of assignments and lead-ins for assignments and documents of a handout. Sometimes it’s a few resources that we don’t get to use in class that I think they might need if they need extra support. So, “If you don’t know what I’m talking about with topic sentences, click here.” They can do some self-tutoring there. I summarize the homework for them so that they can get that better. When I make changes…I try to make my class now as flexible as possible so I can make changes based on the curriculum they need. And if I’m going to fly like that they need to know where to go to find the updated information because the old syllabus calendar is not going to work. I try to embed pictures to make it pretty because they like embedded content. Like, “Click on this and watch the video.” But again, that’s not impressing them. That’s really what they expect. Sometimes, if there’s a good day like this where we have a good discussion—I just got a new smartphone. Up until this point I’ve just had students take pictures with their phones and email them to me. So sometimes when they have good information that I want to refer back to in class or show them, then there’s this map.

I use the discussion a lot. I use it for extra credit. If I’m giving them opportunities to transfer their knowledge. And in some ways this course management system lets me do some stuff on autopilot that is really useful. In previous semesters I let students keep a vocabulary log for extra credit, because some people are not native speakers or they’re struggling readers and so they need to look up a lot of words and if they don’t they’re not going to understand it. A few students would do it for extra credit and I’d look at the list and think, “I would have no idea this is a challenging word for you.” This word seems like common parlance to me, but I also work in a world where referring to common parlance also seems like a totally reasonable use of language. I started seeing just how much they didn’t know and I made it mandatory and I made them put it
on Blackboard. And Blackboard had a new feature where you had to post first before you could see anyone else’s posts. So that was beautiful functionality. Thank you Blackboard. Sometimes we’re friends. Because they didn’t have to worry, “Well if I post first they’re just going to copy and paste my stuff.” So that was very nice. And they could look—I don’t know much they did this—if the words they don’t know are the same words other people don’t know. I gave them very explicit directions like “this is how you format it.” Then, when they did the first one I brought them up on the board as was like, “Did this person follow directions? No. Did this person follow directions? Yes.” And so, for the subsequent ones they realized, “Oh wait if I copy and paste the list of the words I don’t know, then I didn’t include the sentence with the original context. I didn’t include which dictionary I looked it up for. I didn’t include the MLA citation for the book itself.” Then I’ll tell them, “I will put a reminder in assignments that you have a vocabulary post due.” And at the end of the semester I’m going to grade them all.

So vocabulary and I embed videos and examples when I can. But as you can see, this is not top notch…sometimes, I mean. This is cute. This is their introduction and they learn how to do things.

The other thing I’ve learned is they don’t know how to do the thing. In the thing. And I have to show them. I need to embed images that has all of this stuff that says “Click on ‘Create Thread’ to include your contribution.” Because I think as an instructor I think it’s part of my job to find out what they don’t know. Because they will not tell me, and they will fake and pretend and hope because they are scared of being punished. Every time I think I have made enough adjustments for their desire to pretend that they know and not reveal that they don’t know, I just find it’s like false bottoms, nesting eggs all the way down. So, I have to create assignments where we can see the lack of knowledge and make it OK. Because they’re also supposed to be
like digital natives and blah blah blah. They don’t. They know how to do the things they know how to do. And I don’t know how to do those things. I don’t Instagram with filters. I negative don’t care. I’m so glad that my life is not taken up with the things that they spend their time on and there is almost no transfer of skills. Just because they do those things does not mean they have any idea how to interact with the system. They don’t. And they feel like it’s not ok to not know. So I have to teach them Blackboard. When they’re submitting things to SafeAssign for the first time I have to tell them how to do it. And that pisses me off about Blackboard because my view is different from theirs. So I can’t show them how to do the thing using what they see. I click on this. I’m going to get a big red banner that says, “You don’t have permission…” Yours won’t do that. I’m the instructor so it’s going to yell, but when you click on it, it will work. And then I have to teach them about what the plagiarism reports mean. When things are due they’re due in two ways: online and in hard copy. If they give me one or the other it’s on time and then they have to go do the other thing. If it’s on time then good. That saves them so much heartache.

The other thing is I tell them at the beginning of the semester you have to upload these to Blackboard because at the end you have to make a portfolio and someone’s computer will die and you will lose all your work and you will either be faced with the prospect of retyping your hardcopies. If it’s on Blackboard you just go back and download it and re-upload it to the portfolio. If Blackboard were smarter, they would go into SafeAssign and click and drag it into a portfolio. I mean, Blackboard come on! It’s your own internal functionality my dear.

R: I feel like we’ve skipped down…Do you feel then, and you’ve kind of addressed this a little bit but maybe not specifically, do you feel like your in-person pedagogy is translated into the CMS really well?
P: I think so. I think I’m fine at managing my tone in an online teaching setting. I have to tell them on the first day, “You’ll find that I’m high energy, no nonsense. At some point during this semester you will have a problem and you will forget the second part because you only remember the first part. So I’m telling you now no nonsense.” But I think online I can shift my tone so they can hear the high energy no nonsense. I’m careful when I’m colloquial to make it the kind of usage that would be understandable to a nonnative speaker. I try and make it a friendly and warm voice that lets them know, “Hi! Now you have to do this.”

R: The next question is about changing your teaching style, and I think this will be interesting since you said you’ve always taught using it. So, I don’t know how applicable that is. Do you feel like your teaching style would be different if you didn’t have the CMS or do you think it would be the same?

P: I mean, the fantasy world is that it would be pretty different, because I wouldn’t be doing all of this in between classes work. And I think even as I use a CMS over time there is still evolution within that use. And some of it is just learning what Blackboard can do. If you go into my old classes I never built a banner. And now I do, because it makes it cute. It seems a little bit more personal. I find that I can be mentored well by other faculty members who are doing good things on Blackboard that I would like to do as well.

Part of my teaching style is I just try to listen and look for patterns. I just try to close read the situation that I am in and think about it critically. For example, one of the things I’ve come to think is that once my students find the course management system is always available then they might think that they don’t need to come see me, because there is always a way for them to access this teacher voice even if it’s not me…Since I’m here they’re not in this room with me.
R: I think you’ve already answered the next question all over the place: how you perceive you students’ interactions with the CMS.

P: Yeah. And they love-hate it as much as I do. And I think their feedback makes it better. So I used to, for example, make beautiful little folders for all my assignments as we were moving through a sequence of assignments, project 1, project 2, project 3, and what I discovered was for my wildly disorganized students that was not helping because they didn’t even know which folder to go into. So, I now put it all in one long list and I teach them the find feature. “You don’t know where to find the handout on quotation integration. You don’t remember what week we did it, you don’t remember what unit we did it in, you just know there was a day that in class we did that thing and you can’t find it. So search this and it will show you every instance of quotation integration.” And they wouldn’t be able to do that within individual folders. But then, look at this. It’s a storm of stuff. They start scrolling through this and they do not see careful scaffolding, support. The students who are already spinning out of control look at this and get overwhelmed. This is not support for them. It is just deeper in the weeds. They look at this and they don’t see helpful answers to the questions that they need as they need them. They see, that is a block of words and is totally overwhelming.

R: So it’s a catch-22.

P: Yeah! So I just pull it up on the screen and I talk about that. “Here’s what I’m trying to do.” I’ve had students make office hours appointments so I can show them how this works. “Here we are on Blackboard. Do you see how this is blue, that means you can click on it and download it.” Because they don’t know that. They don’t know. Some have to come to office hours because they have no idea how to interact with this. Okay, nontraditional student. Okay, student whose high school did not have a lab. You’re on the other side of the digital divide. OK.
And the digital divide is changing because for the last two academic years 100% of my students could bring in a laptop computer. My first two years I had to fight people and make enemies to get lab time. I would walk in and people had double booked us, someone else had taken my spot…it was a bloodbath trying to get my students in front of computers. And now they can all get there. Someone might have the latest MacBook Air who is sitting next to someone who has the [old model].

R: Then, how significant do you think this piece is to not only what you’re doing in your classroom but in general in the learning process.

P: I think it’s really important and I honestly have no idea how much it teaches them, but it supports them when they need to go back because they didn’t get it. I haven’t done a lot of flipping where they try it first online and then we discuss it, and that might be more useful and an area for growth.

R: Sure. Then, the next question is to consolidate your opinion maybe into a word. If you had to describe how you feel about the CMS, do you think it’s a tool, a method for delivery, is it an enhancement? Is it something else?

P: Yeah. My pedagogy is very tool driven as my metaphor and this is just another one.

R: Yeah.

P: But I think in actually usage it’s more of a delivery system. It’s more of a little mailbox where we pass notes.

R: The last question then is one that is interesting because I’ve had to rethink the question. How significant do you think your input as an instructor, or the input of your students is, when it comes to designing and redesigning the CMS. Initially I meant this on a big picture CMS level, but I’ve had people also answer it in your own site.
P: I listen to my students because I want their experience of the site to be better and that has real world implications. If I weren’t listening to them I would have no idea that folders was not the best practice. To me, “We’re on the first thing, go to the first thing folder.” But until some of them had told me, “I’m really at sea,” I think, “Oh!” Folders are not the way. Even though I want it to be, I have to let it go.

I used to, in my in class evaluations, have them write an essay about technology—screen usage, course management systems and whatnot—and I should put it back in. I stopped putting it there because I started getting the same answers. Maybe it’s time to re-ask that question too to see how they’re doing it differently. I’m usually there five minutes before class and they’ll let their sort of grumbles and happy sounds come out during that time so I can see it. If I have something on the course management system I’ll bring it up on the screen when I’m walking them through the homework, and sometime they’ll say something then. So, “Oh, that’s how you see it. That’ not how I saw it, but that’s how you see it.” And that’s really useful.

Do I have any input on how Blackboard gets built? I do a lot of stuff with the Center for Teaching Excellence. Those folks are nice and good and sort of keep me up to speed. I’ve asked questions like, “Why can’t Blackboard take attendance? They could see…” How much effort would that really take Blackboard? And I have been saying that since I logged in to Blackboard and was like “Where’s the attendance feature? There’s…no attendance feature in a course management system? You do upgrades every year and have added blogs and wikis and YouTube embedding and a lot of other stuff. Okay, Blackboard. Good luck.” Let me log into Blackboard on my phone and take attendance.

So…do I feel like I have…no. Blackboard does stuff. I tried to make a quiz and I just got halfway through it and thought, “Oh, this is totally stupid.” What I wanted to do was take the
vocab posts that my students had made and create an end of the semester vocabulary quiz populated from the words they had selected. And I started building it and I was like, “Oh my gosh. I can’t make it. I can’t go through all these radio buttons.” No thank you. That’s not going to happen.

R: Cool. Any other thoughts?

P: No. I would be really interested in reading in what you have as an end product.

R: I will absolutely share that with anyone who is interested. Thank you.
Interview Transcript 2

Researcher: How would you describe your pedagogical style when you think about your teaching style, the assignments, the ways you assess students? What’s central to your courses?

Participant: I feel like I fall into that really project based learning. It has that inquiry based and then a lot of collaborative work. So, a lot of small group discussion. It’s kind of discovery and discussion and then afterwards the self-reflection piece as well. So if you have an assignment that you give students there might be a short little writing assignment like a question that they explore and then maybe they’re put into small groups and they’re sharing that. And then, as they begin to write their paper then they’re sharing that in small peer review groups. There’s a lot of discussion. There might be just a short, target lecture at the beginning of the class period and then they focus on their writing. So I would say that’s probably more of my style.

R: How does that translate to the course management system?

P: That’s a little difficult. Because it’s hard to reflect that process in that CMS, Blackboard.

Now, obviously, I might be able to use that Collaborate if I had access as a teaching assistant, but I know after this summer experiencing teaching here, using Blackboard for the first time, I had used some other content management systems elsewhere that were different. But because as teaching assistants we’re limited, I followed a syllabus of another professor. I saw in the fall one person’s way of using the course management system, and in the spring a different professor’s. So it was kind of interesting to see how two professors within the English program used it in kind of very different ways.

I would like to use parts of it more, but even though they have those resources where you can kind of look at things, we’re limited and they won’t show it to us because we aren’t
technically faculty. So, I think that’s really limited my view of how this course management system could influence some of the things I want to do.

R: Right. So there are issues with access?

P: Right. And I think the other part is… I guess for me, I like to sit down and not do this in just a quick half hour, but to actually, for instance, the [College Writing II] e-portfolio instruction—I’m watching something, I’m listening to something, and even if I had just a human body there and we would have some sort of small teaching things so that I knew how to use some of this that would be fantastic.

R: So the tutorials you like, but having some support would be helpful?

P: Right. And I always feel like people are so busy here that I hate to ask often. I feel like if we had a contact person that we could go to…that would be more accessible as being a person that is connected to us in the college.

R: Sure.

P: I think there’s even more awareness of how to design a class based on my audience. So coming in, many of my students have very little to no understanding of how Blackboard works. So, with that in mind, I am almost trying to keep things as simple as I can and then every time we have a new assignment or whatever that I open that up and I say, “Here is where all of this information is in this folder.” And I created weekly folders so that everything that they needed would be in that week. Also, showing them how to upload a paper or how to do different things like that too. The one problem with that is that, like in some of the other course management systems I’ve used, you would have a faculty view and then you would have a student view. So, for instance, if I wanted to show them how to upload them into SafeAssign, I can’t because I
have that faculty view, or I can’t show some things to the students by switching to the student view. So that makes it a little difficult sometimes.

R: So you can’t even really model it, because you don’t have the same access?

P: Right.

R: So, how do you think that impacts your students’ interaction with the CMS? How do you feel that those access issues, or even the need to show them how to do stuff, how does that impact how they’re viewing it? Do they think about those things?

P: Well it’s interesting. I do think students are frustrated with having to use technology within their courses. I’m not sure that they complain too much about the language arts ones because we probably don’t use it as much as courses that have them take quizzes or things like that more online. But I do think it’s an extra layer that makes things a little overwhelming to students, at least in the very beginning. So, those first semester freshman on campus with little to no experience ever using any kind of course management systems. I polled them last year and I think maybe 70-80% really didn’t know how to do anything on Blackboard. I just made that assumption this year and embedded that into my practice and process of how to do things. So, I think it is a little overwhelming and I don’t know how much is actually done in orientation when they’re here on campus. Which might be interesting to see. As more people maybe use Moodle, Schoology, that might be free, we may see that shift, but I don’t know that that’s going to be shifting for a few more years.

R: But so that level of student frustration is impacting how you’re teaching as well. You’re using it as a piece of conscious teaching as well. So, in that way, is it changing how you teach or are you just adapting to having to use that?
P: Well, I think there’s just this greater awareness of where there might be limitations. So, for instance, I have this young student and he was instead of—and I don’t know if he didn’t know how to do an attachment in an email—but he was opening up a Word document, copying and pasting the whole thing, sending me an email copying and pasting the whole thing. So, I think we have this natural assumption that kids know how to email, upload attachments, use drop boxes. Or kids will forget to hit the submit button. Or things won’t show up as green and having been submitted. It’s just kind of an extra glitch and not knowing if things got submitted. And sometimes you feel stupid asking how to do something. I feel stupid sometimes asking how to do things.

R: Right. And especially if that accessibility isn’t there. You can’t even get to the tutorials you need.

P: Yeah. Exactly. And I don’t know what that’s like as a student. I just know for me…to use it as a student and then to use it on the other hand as a teaching assistant, you’re looking at it from a couple different lenses.

R: How significant do you feel the CMS is to the learning-teaching process?

P: I think it’s huge because we’re asking our students to engage in a lot more digital spaces and they need to be able to do that. Outside of the academic area I don’t know. Because I sort of see a whole layer when I go home and talk to people and the things that they need to use, that most of them aren’t familiar with what a CMS even is, and/or that they use digital spaces in lots of different ways than how we do. But our students definitely need to understand how to do that; especially I think online courses that are going to gain in popularity. And as those increase, we really need to be aware of how those course management systems can be used from those design perspectives to help students navigate through a course. Especially if we’re going to be looking
at retention. How many students drop out [of online courses]. What remediation pieces need to be there? How independent do those students need to be? How persistent? How do they problem solve? And those are all layers that you may or may not see when you’re doing an online course.

R: So how do you see those layers interacting? How would you describe the CMS?

P: I see the CMS as a lot of different things. [laughs] Definitely a tool. I see it as a tool. I definitely see it as a delivery system for communicating both ways. I have used it as an enhancement, especially when I upload maybe little videos, like when I did the public service announcement assignment. It’s an enhancement to instruction, just like another layer. Some students might never check those things and I would love to do and understand more about tracking. How do I know how many of my students and which students are looking at those things and how many times, to see whether they’re being used or I’m putting them up and thinking, “Oh this is great! I’m enhancing all of this learning that they’re doing!” And I try to anticipate a need, and then nobody even bothers to look at it so why am I worrying.

R: So, it’s kind of reciprocal relationship between the tool and if the tool lets it be an enhancement?

P: Yes.

R: Are you adding stuff that they aren’t necessarily required to look at, but you’re giving them extra examples?

P: Right. And sometimes I might just start with a quick lecture and then open and show them some resources that might help them. It’s not necessarily like a flipped classroom, but here are some additional resources. They aren’t necessarily looking at the stuff ahead of time, but if I load it ahead of time some of my more proactive students are looking at all of those things and sometimes if I could track that, “Did 50% of my class already look at this?” and then I could just
mention it. And then maybe that just becomes part of their practice that they just look at some of those things as it’s being loading.

R: Right. And this reflects something you said earlier about that need for them to be independent learners in order to use it effectively. So, that raises the question for me, do they need to already be independent learners, or is it teaching them to be?

P: [laughs] You would hope it’s the first. I believe that for many of them…fewer of them are. And maybe it’s just the idea of the smaller college campus that there is maybe more of personalized attention too, but I definitely think that we hope that they would have those skills, but through using a CMS we help to improve their ability to supplement when they need to and those things are available to them and they know that versus sending us fifteen thousand emails on how to do the e-Portfolio even though there is this great video to look at on how to do that. That they’re sending us that email to begin with is probably saying that they aren’t there yet. But I think it becomes less as the semester goes on.

R: So maybe it’s scaffolding that they need to know it’s out there to use it. Now, I have to figure out what we’ve already talked about but… How significant do you feel your input is to designing or redesigning the CMS?

P: I mean, if you’re talking about just for the course, or for the larger how does Blackboard work across the board at the university. They’re two different layers. I think that it is important. I’ve never really thought about it from the input of our students. What would it look like if we took a College Writing I class and had like a scavenger hunt? That would be kind of a curious thing if you designed a College Writing I course if you had students design the Blackboard site for their class.

R: Sure.
P: And how much would that…you could do for the analytical paper then, some of the analysis of design elements of things or different websites. That might be a really interesting course. I’m sure there are going to be even journals that would have some things that would talk about design they could look at. That’s an awesome idea.

Right. And what would be the best way of doing feedback.

R: Sure and they could look at all the tools and figure out how to use them and use them in a new way.

P: I wonder that sometimes too.

R: So what would some of your frustrations with that be? Or what are some of the limitations you see of using Blackboard?

P: With feedback, I go in and I create the comment bubbles and do that electronically. Sometimes when I have to put a grade in a box, they’re not all grouped together properly…Attempt 1 of 3, or 3 of 3… And teaching students how to do things. I sometimes wonder about including audio comments instead, but I don’t want to do that if it’s going to take me ten more steps to process it.

R: So teaching them how to do it…

P: And then remembering how to do it. So, I don’t know. But I do think that’s sort of compelling about having a College Writing I class design their site.

R: Well we got off on a bit of tangent there, but I like it.

P: Is there anything we didn’t cover?

R: Did you talk at all about the tools you use?

P: I like the discussion board, and sometimes I add like video or other links. Grade Center.
R: Are there any tools that you’ve experimented with and then you rejected. Like it didn’t do what you wanted it to and so you decided not to use it?

P: No. But I really want to try more. One of the things I have thought about is audio feedback but as I started looking, I thought about how many steps I have to go through to do that. To me it just wasn’t worth that study.

R: Right. So at that point you rejected it before you even…

P: Right. Because of time limitations. And I was probably smart to do that too because I think this group of students came in with very little experience. I had students who didn’t know how to do a lot of stuff like even including page numbers, format a paper.

R: So you see that as even more basic than the CMS stuff?

P: Yes. We have this assumption that they know how to do all these things.

R: So then this becomes an additional thing you have to teach them?

P: Yes.

R: You’re also noting that this might not be something they ever see again. So are the skills translating or is it just for their college experience?

P: Right. So, is that process of figuring out how some of these tools work transferable? It may be new and they’re sort of figuring it out. How are they learning to figure out those things and problem solve? Are they thinking critically? How much does that translate to a workspace, a work environment? I’m sure some of the tools are similar like Collaborate.

R: So do you think they don’t see the connection?

P: Yeah. I don’t know. I mean they’re going to have to turn around and use whatever system they’re given. It would be valuable for education majors, nursing majors…physical therapists.
R: Well, I think we covered most everything. You mentioned that you don’t think the project-based learning translates well into the CMS?

P: No. I don’t think it does. You could have pieces, but it couldn’t do the whole thing. It couldn’t replace the face-to-face.

R: OK. Well thank you for your time.

P: Thank you.