Studying the Rhetoric of the LMS in the Online Composition Classroom

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Abstract

Learning management systems (LMSs) are a common software many higher education institutions rely on to facilitate online, hybrid, and web-enhanced courses. However, while our students use the LMS for online learning, less often do they study the LMS as a cultural artifact that shapes how learning happens. This assignment prepares first-year writing students to disrupt the perceived neutrality of LMSs. Students study the LMS and grapple with issues related to technology, power dynamics, audience, and purpose that are foundational to their reading and writing of other texts. Before engaging in this project, students practice conducting rhetorical analysis and inquiry research that prepare them for the kinds of thinking and questioning required for the final LMS project. The final project for the course is a three-part LMS project that culminates in a digital presentation.

Introduction

In 2009 Kevin Eric DePew and Heather Lettner-Rust argued that many distance learning interfaces privilege the instructor's knowledge and evaluation. For DePew and Lettner-Rust (2009), the interface used for distance learning "sets up a power dynamic in which the capability to share the roles of creating knowledge is juxtaposed with the instructor's capability to normalize the students and reify their own authority through their gaze" (p. 174). Moreover, DePew and Lettner-Rust argue that the design of the interface has effects on how communication, classroom management, and writing instruction occur. Almost a decade later, in 2018, Alison Witte (2018) made a similar argument that these learning systems can be a site of tension in the classroom because they have the power to shape how students and teachers interact and how students raise questions; they also determine who has access to what materials. Witte (2018) draws on genre theory to "think of the interface not as a tool, but as a text with both expectations and formal conventions attached to it" (p. 50). Like DePew and Lettner-Rust, Witte further argues that learning management system interfaces function to replicate the top-down structure where the teacher delivers content. For Witte, the interface tends to be used to create genres as opposed to it being a genre. When users think of the interface as a tool used to create genres, it problematically suggests that the interface is neutral. This conceptualization of the interface as neutral reinforces the warning from Selfe and Selfe (1994) that when technology is considered neutral, its normalizing power is strengthened. Taking this idea further, Mckoy et al. (2020) asks us to think about interface and design through a race-conscious lens to identify if and how racism is encoded into the technology through a myth of neutrality that often privileges whiteness.

In my own first-year writing (FYW) courses, I have found that my students overwhelmingly find technologies, including learning management systems (LMSs), neutral and only beneficial to their learning processes. This benefit students see with the LMS might translate to a false sense of neutrality, where they see it simply as a tool that allows them to submit assignments, including participating in discussion forums without thinking of the effects those tools have

on their work. This line of thinking could affect their continued interaction with technology, particularly preventing them from seeing the ways in which the LMS could reinforce hegemonic norms. Thus, I argue that designing projects that ask students to study LMSs is one way we can begin to pay more attention to the power of technology. In other words, students should not only use LMSs for online learning but should also study them for the effects they might have on their learning. Because our instruction and course design are important aspects of the LMS, inevitably some of the students' investigation will also entail studying how the instructor chooses to adopt the LMS. Indeed, students also study and pay attention to the tools that have been made available to them and emphasized by the instructor. Because students' perspectives have not been centered in much of OWI research projects to date (Martinez et al., 2019), a project, such as the one I share here, which requires students to interrogate power structures, can provide "excluded members of society access to systems of power and grounds on which those systems can be challenged and ultimately changed in meaningful ways" (Banks, 2005, p. 2). Preparing students to develop a robust awareness of power, agency, audience, and purpose requires that students and their instructors think more critically about online education and the interfaces with which they interact.

Thus, drawing inspiration from scholars that ask us to challenge the perceived neutrality of technology (DePew & Lettner-Rust, 2009; Mckoy et al., 2020; Selfe & Selfe, 1994; Witte, 2018), I designed this assignment because I believe that FYW courses should create the spaces for students to study the effects of the LMS with which they interact. Moreover, this assignment supported students in achieving course learning outcomes related to studying rhetorical, ethical, and methodological conventions and locating, analyzing, and synthesizing information to produce works in a variety of genres. As McCorkle cautioned in 2012, scholars must shift what we ask students to pay attention to. Not only is it important that we teach multimodal composition but that we also prepare students to "develop a robust awareness of the tools" so that they learn not only how to use the tools but particularly so that they "recognize how such tools operate as manifestations of broader sociocultural forces" (McCorkle, 2012, p. 175).

Assignment: Scaffolding to Enhance Meaning Making

This assignment takes place at a four-year public research institution in the Detroit Metropolitan Area and within a general education writing course, which is part of a writing foundations requirement. This LMS project is the final of three projects in the course. First, students spend roughly three weeks writing a short textual analysis paper, where they select a current newspaper opinion essay that addresses issues related to access, technology, or online education. The purpose of this first project is to prepare students to study language and its effects on audiences and to engage in analytical work that prepares them for the second project, an inquiry-based research paper. The inquiry-based research paper builds on students' analytical work by asking them to conduct research on the same topic as their textual analysis paper. Through their roughly six weeks research, students practice important skills such as asking questions, locating and analyzing key sources, and synthesizing information. These skills are foundational to students' success in the written portion of the final LMS project.

The LMS project itself has a written and a digital component. For the written component, students spend roughly two weeks researching the LMS company in order to gather information that would contextualize their findings of the LMS itself. To support students in this research, I provide them with a list of questions and work with them to modify those questions and design additional ones. Students investigate factors such as who the investors are, what visual elements are present on the website, who seems to be represented on the site and who is not, where the company is located, among other factors. While students are researching the

company, I also invite them to draw on sources from their inquiry-based research paper, to help them make sense of issues related to access and representation they might encounter on the company's site. Students also participate in a group forum to discuss one of four scholarly articles including Oswal's (2015) "Physical and learning disabilities in OWI," Witte's (2018) " 'Why Won't Moodle…?' Using Genre Studies to Understand Students' Approaches to Interacting with User-Interfaces," Arola's (2010) "The design of Web 2.0, the rise of the template, the fall of design," and Duffelmeyer's (2000) "Critical computer literacy: Computers in first-year composition as topic and environment." These activities result in a short paper about the LMS company that they draw on for the digital component of the project.

The digital component of this LMS project asks students to then take their findings and present a claim about the LMS in a digital format. I present students with a list of design options, which I adapted from Ball et al.'s (2018) *writer/designer*. I asked students to select the design option that best allows them to effectively present the claim they are making about LMSs. Most students chose to design infographics and Google Slides with a few creating video essays. In their digital composition, students also relied on their weekly reflections and personal experiences with the LMS in conjunction with what they learned about the company from their research to present their claim.

Each week since the start of the semester, as students work through the textual analysis project, the inquiry-based exploration, and the final digital LMS project, they also write weekly logs documenting their awareness, expectations of, and experiences with the course's LMS. The weekly logs are a crucial part of the course because they set the foundation for students to develop "critical computer literacy" (Duffelmeyer, 2000, p. 359) by paying attention to the role of the LMS in relation to the work they are producing in the course. In other words, students practice seeing the LMS as an integral part of their learning ecology and not a separate entity where they simply submit assignments. Moreover, as scholars have identified, metacognition is a key component for knowledge awareness and transfer across contexts to be effective (Kurt, 2007; Soldner, 1998; VanKooten, 2016; Zinchuk, 2017), so the logs help students develop this keen awareness of the LMS throughout the semester.

Reflection: Developing Consciousness about the LMS

My favorite aspect about this project is that it requires students to realize their learning is not taking place in a vacuum. Just as how the material classroom space and the bodies that occupy that space shape how learning takes place, the LMS likewise shapes how that learning happens, and this project requires that students recognize the effect. For example, I ask students "What features about Moodle do you dislike? Why?" and also "What aspect of Moodle, if any, do you believe should be designed by students?" Questions such as these invite students not only to move beyond simply using the LMS but also to truly pay attention to possible problems that exist within the LMS and how to respond to those problems. Moreover, questions such as these allow students to delve into what they practice through the inquiry-based research project, where they have to rely on personal experiences with the technology and draw on those personal experiences to solve potential problems. As Bawarshi (2003) argued, equally as important as what writers write is what contributes to their agency in determining what and how they write.

Furthermore, students are essentially working on this project for the entire semester through their weekly reflections. From the first day when they log into the Moodle course, skim the units, click around on different pages, and view their classmates' profiles, they are interacting with the course and the LMS in ways that will continue to evolve and shape their relationship with the system. Essentially, this project supports instructors and students in what Morris (2018) calls "becoming conscious" not just "becoming knowledgeable" (para. 11) of digital interfaces

and their effects. This level of consciousness that students develop is evident when in their reflections, they employ concepts such as "affordance," "effects," and "constraints." These ways of thinking and the connections among all the project show students that they are not engaged in busy work.

Despite its benefits, there are also some elements of this project that I would pay closer attention to the next time I assign it. Just as important as the results of the project is the process of creating it. For example, it is very important to shape the questions with the students. The first time I assigned this project I did not include my students in the design of most of the questions, and I did not spend enough time setting up the context for why this inquiry was important. This resulted in student responses where many simply summarized information from the LMS company website and indicated that the LMS itself was useful, but only a few provided any analytical evidence of why they drew these conclusions. While I was glad that many of my students found the LMS useful, my feedback to most students asked them to support the conclusions they were forming. This analytical support is particularly key given issues of access that surround LMSs for some users. For example, Oswal (2015) argues that some LMSs are designed only for "ocular efficiency" (p. 267). This idea brings to the forefront that although LMSs might be wonderful and useful for some students, they can also have harmful effects for others.

I also found myself rethinking the assumptions I made about the kinds of technology students are using to engage in the course. Toward the end of the course when I read students' reflections, one of my most surprising realizations was that multiple students were taking my online course using their mobile devices. Rodrigo (2015) argues that there are a growing number of students using mobile devices for online writing courses. This is something I was not aware of earlier on at the beginning of my own course. When students take courses with their mobile devices, it affects how they interact with me and with the course, and this is something I believe instructors should be aware of at the beginning of the course.

Conclusions

Preparing students to disrupt the perceived neutrality of LMSs, and technology more broadly, is foundational to their growth as critical thinkers and writers. Thus, it is important that students not view this assignment as a kind of usability test of the LMS. Instead, they should view it as a scholarly inquiry into the LMS they use to learn because they can identify how the shape of the interface reflects who is in control of the interaction, reflecting the "balance of power and control" between the user and the interface (Laurel & Mountford, 1990, p. xii). The goal is for this inquiry to lead to a deep understanding of the LMS as a dynamic system with effects and for them to develop the habits of mind that helps them to ask questions about the LMS and other systems with which they engage. Of course, not all writing courses are facilitated through the university LMS. In many ways, the work of studying the LMS can still take place even when writing courses are facilitated through, for example, websites or other platforms. While instructors are provided with access to LMSs, university issued emails, and other digital interfaces, instructors still have the agency to determine the extent to which the systems will shape our own pedagogy.

Most students who take my writing course are also taking other classes that require some engagement with the LMS. Thus, this LMS project also invites students to pay attention to the complexities and variations in how they learn in each class based on how the LMS is framed. This is where much of the transfer happens, too. Oftentimes students do not recognize how the approaches to thinking and their work with different media transfer from one class to another. In fact, VanKooten (2020) argues that digital writing is one way for students and instructors to

better understand the transfer of writing knowledge. In my own project, this meta-awareness about transfer manifests particularly when students create their digital project to share their findings. Also, my institution utilizes Moodle as its LMS. Although my students studied Moodle, it is noteworthy that institutions' choice in LMSs vary and change constantly, so this assignment can be modified accordingly based on whichever learning system the instructor or university uses.

In all, the overall goal is not for students to be familiar with the LMS itself; instead, it is for them to develop the habits of mind necessary to pay critical attention to the function of LMSs and how these functions create assumptions about how teaching and learning occur.

ASSIGNMENT

Learning Management System (LMS) Digital Writing Project

Weekly Reflections Questions

Each week you will write a reflection that documents your experiences with this course's Learning Management System (LMS). In your one paragraph reflections, consider a combination of the following questions:

- What features about Moodle do you like? Why?
- What features about Moodle do you dislike? Why?
- What, if any, social networking sites do you have experience with?
- How is Moodle similar to and different from any social networking site that you have experience using? For example, study the interface layout, navigation, notifications, where tools are located, color scheme, etc.
- After focusing on the similarities and differences between Moodle and social networking sites, explain whether you believe those similarities and differences were helpful or harmful to your own *learning* of rhetoric and composition. In other words, discuss the relationship between the design of Moodle and how it might have helped or hurt how you learn writing. How does the design of the Moodle interface affect the work you (are able to) do?
- What aspect of Moodle, if any, do you believe should be designed by students? In other words, if you could change any aspect of Moodle to better support you as a student, what would it be and why?
- In what ways does the design of Moodle impact how you communicate with me and your peers and how you come to practice writing?
- What assumptions do you think the LMS interface makes about you, the student, about how you learn? How do these assumptions affect how you engage with the course, your classmates and/or the instructor? What and/or who seems to be privileged through the design of Moodle?
- Do any of the tools in the LMS make you think about issues of power, oppression, race, gender, agency, accessibility, disability, etc.?

Part I: LMS Digital Writing Project (written component)

You have been studying and practicing writing and rhetoric by conducting textual analysis and inquiry-research. You have also been writing weekly reflections on your interactions with the LMS. Now you are ready to practice creating your own rhetorical situation through this inquiry-based project called the Learning Management System (LMS) digital writing project. This project has two components, a written and a digital.

Learning management systems are a common and important aspect of learning, especially online learning. Many institutions rely on them for instruction. For example, they are used for submitting assignments, completing quizzes, posting grades, and engaging in class discussions, etc. Throughout this course, you have used Moodle in a variety of ways, and you have been reflecting on your experiences engaging with the LMS. This project asks you to build on your experiences using Moodle by drawing on your rhetorical analysis and research skills to conduct a thorough investigation of and analysis into the effects that Moodle has on your learning. Importantly, I am not looking for a basic description of Moodle. Instead, focus on your own argument about LMSs based on *the effects* of Moodle on your learning. Visit the Moodle website, and gather information that responds to a combination of the following questions:

- Who is involved in the creation of Moodle? What do you know about the creators? Do they list their credentials on the site? Is there any way to contact them?
- What images are displayed on the website? Who and what is (not) represented?
- Does anything on the site make you think about issues related to identity, representation, diversity, or inclusion?
- Are there any investors? advertisers? Who is funding the company?
- How is information presented? What modes are adopted?
- Does the information seem accurate? Is there any bias? (cultural, political, religious, etc.)
- Is the information recent?
- What can we learn about the company that can teach us about the LMS we use here?
- What did you learn about the company (any politics behind it) that can inform any choices made regarding the design of the LMS interface? Pay attention to multiple interfaces here. You might look at how assignments are submitted, how the discussion board is framed, and even how communication such as chat and email are designed.
- How do scholars who study issues related to technology, issues, interface, and online pedagogy, etc. conceptualize the LMS and what conceptualization do you find most engaging and productive that might speak to your own experience?

Part II: LMS Digital Writing Project (digital component)
Now that you have gathered details about the LMS, this final part of the project asks you to share your findings with your audience by presenting an argument about the LMS. Both your weekly reflections and your research of the LMS company were to prepare you for the final digital writing presentation. Importantly, you are not expected to share all of your findings from your inquiry; instead, consider that your audience are students new to online learning and/or to the university, and determine what they should know about the LMS based on your own personal experiences and your own research.

As we have learned from Ball, Sheppard, and Arola (2018), selecting technology to share your project depends on a number of factors such as the rhetorical situation of your project, the most appropriate modes and media to fit that situation, and any affordances that are available for you to create your project. Below is a list of commonly used media. Explore each page before deciding on which you would use to share your findings. This list simply offers suggestions, so feel free to use any tool you are comfortable with. For more examples of technology choices, see Ball, Sheppard, and Arola's *Writer/designer: A guide to making multimodal projects.*

Infographic (Venngage, Piktochart)
Presentation (PowerPoint, Google Slides)

Movie (iMovie [Mac], Moviemaker [Windows], YouTube Editor)
Website (Google Sites, Weebly, Wix)
Audio (Podcast, Audacity)
Images (Poster, Storybird, Fotor)

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v6i2.102.

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