Moving from an Online Bulletin Board to a Useful Resource

By Deb Hetrick

The recent focus on website development at the Eastern Michigan Writing Project (EMWP) began in 2005. The graduate assistants assigned to us were no longer able to make changes to our website due to a lack of appropriate software. In addition, Eastern Michigan University was requiring a more uniform look to Web pages hosted on their server, including the EMWP’s. These external motivations coincided with our desire for the EMWP website to be more than a static “bulletin board” of writing project events online, and the site director decided to support the reconstruction of our website.

EMWP was also in the process of expanding the kind of programs it was providing. Youth Writing Camps and professional development in collaboration with the North Central Association/Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement were piloted and deemed well received by the community. Because EMWP was evolving, I felt the local site leadership would benefit from evaluating who we were and how that could best be presented online. I learned about the concept of a technology team at the Technology Liaisons Network’s Technology Matters institute in 2005, and the team approach seemed like a good way to examine the new relationships between programs and among the teacher-consultants involved.

EMWP Technology Team

Supported by a Technology Liaisons Network minigrant, EMWP leadership representing our youth programs, our professional development programs, and all three of our teacher strands (teacher as writer, teacher-consultant, and teacher-researcher) met four times within the next year to design a new interactive website.
What We Did

1. At the first session, I introduced social bookmarking (*del.icio.us*) and a technology team blog. My intention was to have the team members bookmark other NWP websites that they liked so we could all look at them and to use the blog as a place for conversation about those sites.

2. The second session was designed to discuss face-to-face what we had seen on the other websites in order to determine the layout, look, and potential content of our own website. A wiki was introduced at this session to facilitate collaborative writing of the website text, though that proved to be an unsuccessful experiment. For the team members, email was still the favored method of communication and the technology introduced was an “add-on” for which they saw no real purpose.

3. At the third session, we discussed even further what we wanted to “tweak” as far as overall design and content. The shift into examining how we represent ourselves as a site was what actually built purpose to the leadership’s collective work.

4. The final meeting happened several months later, after the website had been published. Discussion focused on what worked and what could be improved upon.

After consulting with the EMWP site director, I acquired space from a commercial webhosting company, Startlogic (*http://www.startlogic.com/*), as a place where we could put up the EMWP website. This would free us from the constraints of having to go through university channels in order to make revisions to our website. I began to look through the website templates provided by Startlogic to find one that I thought would work for us. When I was unable to find one, I decided I could either purchase DreamWeaver (a Web design software) or learn html code. Because I have the support of my husband, who is a computer programmer, I opted to save the money and learn html code. By the third session, I had a mock-up of a website, based on suggestions, for the team to look at and discuss. The content was not current, as I had copied and pasted most of it from the old website. That sparked interest in rewriting the content by the team members. At our final session, people were happy with the new content, more or less, but they had some design concerns that will be addressed in the next iteration of the website. Here is the link to our current site: *http://www.emichwp.org/*
The process of working to create the new website made the team think deeply about our “presence” and how the website could be used to the site’s advantage in the future. The team requested new and more interesting pictures to illustrate our work. Site leaders are now more apt to provide those because they know pictures generate interest on the website. Last summer, I was able to post pictures daily, using Flickr (http://www.flickr.com), a photo-sharing website. We produced a podcast and videos also. Posting those to the NWP E-Anthology (http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/programs/ea) prompted a lot of positive feedback to our site. Our summer institute participants and youth camp families all visited the redesigned EMWP website often. Our new Family Literacy Program is sharing our website address with all of their new contacts. The website has really become a resource for our leadership to share, and it is generating email inquiries about our programs.

Where Are We Now?

As EMWP continues to evolve, so does our reliance on the Internet as a location for our resources. The Teacher Research group initiated a blog this year, our newsletter is now online (http://emichwp.blogspot.com), and the EMWP calendar is created with Google Calendars so it can be included on a statewide calendar for the Michigan state network of writing project sites. Program directors are also taking more responsibility in the upkeep of the Web resources they are creating. I am currently exploring the use of a content management system so the directors can make updates to our website themselves.