CSUWP: Writing. Online. A Work in Progress.
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The Beginning

I was not the guy who developed the Colorado State University Writing Project’s (CSUWP) first-generation website. That credit goes to Will Allen, our first technology liaison, current technology liaison, and current webmaster. He and Cindy O’Donnell-Allen, our site’s director, wanted our Web presence to be a communicative space—breathable, if you will. From the start, the website was about providing places to share information. Originally it contained a bulletin board and a chat room so that teachers could use it with their students or with each other to stay in touch and be in conversation about the work of CSUWP. In addition, that website was built outside of the university’s Web presence, using its own domain (http://csuwritingproject.org) at a time when it was not common to do so. The use of a unique domain accomplished a couple of important things:

1. CSUWP had its own identity on the Internet independent from the university.
2. The domain was easier and less complex than a URL nested within a larger university website, meaning it was slightly easier to get to and remember.

The Second Act

A year or so after the CSUWP website went live, I began blogging to support my thinking about inquiry and teaching. (http://budtheteacher.typepad.com). As a returning fellow to our second summer institute, I was interested in how we might use blogging and related technologies like podcasting to both document our work and showcase the writing that our teachers were doing. It was such good stuff—we wanted it to get seen and heard.

I created our site blog (http://csuwp.blogspot.com) and podcast feed using Blogger.com and Feedburner.com. We still use both of those tools now, almost two years later. Fellows stay in touch, share their experiences at conferences, post times that they’ll be meeting for writing groups, and so forth. Because of the large geographical range of our site, it’s nice to have one place where we can go to see what folks and the CSUWP are up to. Of course, if you’re keeping score on URLs, you’ll recognize that we doubled our Web presence at that point.

As the blog began to flourish, spam became a problem for the website. That was coincidental, not related to the blog use, but the problems with spam on Web forums pushed people to the blog as an interactive space for CSUWP conversation and resources. Eventually, when people started looking for the CSUWP website, they started finding our informal blog before our formal website, because Google’s algorithms privilege frequently updated sites.
Currently, more than thirty of our site’s participants have author privileges on the blog site—although fewer than ten of those have ever written to the blog. Along the way, teacher-consultants were creating their own blogs as a piece of our post-institute workshop. All our teacher-consultants were creating blogs—but only ten percent of the blogs, at best, were remaining active. Interest was high, though, in technology and how to use the Web as a publishing platform.

A Re-vision

Our blog was soon linked to from the website, and it became the regular source of updated content on the status of our programming, as well as our published work from program participants. Cindy and Will planned a re-design of our website to regain the idea of publishing and documenting what we were about. In late March 2007, the new site went live (http://web.mac.com/cs uwwritingproject), this time using a .mac account as its backbone in order to facilitate easy publishing of photos, videos, audio, and the writing of our community. In addition, video and audio podcasts were posted to share and promote site work. The podcasts, produced as time allows, are slices of life of the CSUWP community. It takes time and effort to make sure that content is added regularly, which speaks to the need for a site to think systematically about content creation—who will create it, how often, etc., as part of a plan to consider dynamic site content.

As that website continues to grow, we’re still using blogging to support our work. During our first Advanced Institute, we used blogs as we examined how technology can influence and support the work of teacher research (http://csuwpai.blogspot.com). That work spawned additional teacher-consultant blogs, and so, while the reach of CSUWP continues to grow online, it does so in a fragmented and ad-hoc way. Future work on our Web presences might be as much about aggregating all of the content we have out there as about working to ensure that the Web presence reflects the work and roles of our writing project site.