Web Presence Case Study: Western Massachusetts Writing Project
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The story of the Web redesign of the Western Massachusetts Writing Project (http://www.umass.edu/wmwp) began as part of a major re-visioning process at our site. We had recently lost one of our founding co-directors to cancer and lost two-thirds of our overall budget to a cut in state funding. These losses, although painful and difficult, forced us to take a hard and deep look into how we could survive as a writing project site. As our site identity became more focused and our sense of audience and purpose more refined, we realized the image we presented on our website no longer truly reflected who we were and what we did.

WMWP’s technology liaison, Paul Oh, cofacilitated a workshop on Web presence at the 2003 NWP Annual Meeting, in which participants were given time to consider the purposes of their actual or imagined websites, as well as some possible paths to constructing a website. A participant at that session, Bob Montgomery from the Coalition for Essential Schools, pointed out that one important consideration often overlooked in conceiving a Web presence is audience. That is, instead of concentrating on what message they want to convey, website planners should consider whom they are attempting to reach and what pieces of information those different audiences might need. This idea of considering audiences and their purposes for visiting a site as a driving force for website visioning resonated with the group at the workshop, and with Paul in particular.

Due to many recent changes at our site, the Western Massachusetts Writing Project was undergoing our own efforts at revamping our website. Paul returned from the Annual Meeting and discussed with the newly appointed director at the time, Bruce Penniman, this notion of focusing the planning for the website on the various audiences who might use the WMWP website and what they might be seeking or needing when visiting the site. And, in true WMWP fashion, Bruce suggested that he and the three co-directors, along with the inservice coordinator, Susan Biggs, engage in a half-day retreat at his house, led by Paul. The goal: to go through a process of arriving at the website’s content based on what WMWP’s various constituent groups might expect or hope to see there. This “visioning” moment was not at all inconsistent with how the site leaders have always tried to understand issues—through a collaborative, brainstorming moment, fueled by conversation and food (in this case, a pizza lunch). The WMWP leadership team meets two or three times a year in this format as a way to take on more in-depth, focused strategic thinking for the local site. Members of the leadership team see this as part of their role and feel compensated for this work through their yearly stipend.

Strategically considering the presentation of content on the website in this way pushed our group toward certain design decisions. For instance, we realized that a person arriving at the website might not know exactly what he or she wanted, but that person
would know who he or she was. So we decided on navigation buttons high up on the page that identified different constituencies and allowed for various portals into the content that might meet their needs.

As these design decisions were being made by the group, and mock-ups being created by Paul for review, WMWP was also involved in an inquiry into the structure of the writing project site. As a result of undergoing the Web redesign process, Bruce decided to use the same lens of audience and purpose in our inquiry to identify core work and redefine the site’s leadership structure. This became a recursive process: our inquiry into the Web presence caused us to look closely at our writing project site map, which began to change and re-form. These changes then brought us back again to further change and re-form our Web presence design. Our process followed a true recursive path much like that of any process of writing. The result was a revised site map of the programs and work we facilitate and the people who are involved in and lead that work. This visual map served as an important inquiry tool that not only helped us re-vision our writing project site but guided our Web presence revision.

At the time, our writing project site map was very linear. Much of our work was functioning as separate projects rather than as pieces of a greater structure. And many of these projects’ purposes were no longer clear. Much of this work was falling on just a few shoulders, but it was difficult to ascertain exactly whose responsibilities were what. Projects often fell to the person who volunteered in a meeting, or to the person whom Bruce could personally persuade to take on work. This often resulted in several people showing up to do the same work and some work being left undone by all. It also began to become clear to us that this made it difficult for new people to step forward into leadership roles.

The shared inquiry process into the development of our new online presence reinforced a culture that had evolved at our site over the years and was beginning to become more visible—a culture of shared leadership. We needed to make this culture more apparent in the way we structured both our writing project site and our online presence. As we often do when faced with new inquiry, we turned to the NWP for resources. We sent Susan and Paul, both with dual roles at the site—inservice coordinator / co-director and tech liaison / co-director—to the NWP Directors Retreat. Here was a perfect opportunity to reflect further on our inquiry process into the ways we were thinking about the leadership and work structure of our writing project site.

Perhaps because we brought our new website design as the artifact to share with others at this retreat, we were paired with site leaders from the Colorado State University Writing Project, whose own work building a new website for their year-old writing project site was similar to the work we had done. Our website designs were of course different since the culture, work, and history at the two sites were different. However, our work together at the Directors Retreat welcomed a collaboration for an upcoming NWP Annual Meeting session titled “Re-visioning Your Web(sites).” The two sites’ collaboration and further reflection in preparing this session took our own learning deeper and broader. The
opportunity to collaboratively prepare our website development story to present to a larger and outside audience helped us understand our work in new ways.

It was also at the Directors Retreat that Paul and Susan further revised the site map, introducing the concept of task forces led by co-directors, thus creating a series of mininetworks within the larger one. Not only would a task force instantly provide a support group, but it would also become a farm league of sorts for people who were interested in becoming more involved in the work of the site but were not yet ready to take the plunge into a full leadership position. Again, the task forces act as a variation of the mentor-mentee model that had already been integrated into many aspects of the writing project site. The co-directors each lead a task force, with membership in the groups open to all writing project fellows.

The website, meanwhile, began to change, too. We had revised the website to reflect our acknowledgement of its varied audiences—teachers, WMWP alumni, and administrators. Now, revisions were made to reflect the interconnected nature of our work. We wanted visitors to be able to move fluidly from one program page to another to reflect the way our programs are interconnected. We also wanted visitors to get from one page to many others in a way that might reflect the many paths through which teachers can enter into involvement in the work of the writing project site.

Paul Oh never took it for granted that he would be the sole authority to create and publish the website under the banner of the Western Massachusetts Writing Project, nor did the site send him off to do this work alone. Rather, the redesign of the website became a true re-vision of our writing project site aided by the lens of technology. Doing the work this time took two years, but doing it this way—as part of a larger site re-visioning—made the work more purposeful.

This process of restructuring our site, both virtually and structurally, brought more to our site than we could have imagined. It further entrenched the role of the technology liaison as a leader and thinking partner in the leadership circle, something that continues to this day even though Paul is no longer at our local site. It encouraged us to take advantage of NWP resources, such as the Directors Retreat, to support and expand this work. And it created opportunities for representatives of our site to present workshops at the NWP Annual Meeting, the Directors Retreat, and the NWP Inservice Institute—which have in turn provided opportunities for further learning.

Small changes have taken place over the years since our total Web presence revision. We’ve added an online newsletter in the format of a blog and developed several other blogs for specific areas of work, such as our growing ELL Initiative.

Currently, WMWP feels the need to revise our Web presence once again. It is an ongoing process. But we’re taking this work slowly. We are presently involved in Project Outreach 3, deep inquiry work into relevance, diversity, and access at our writing project site. This inquiry and visioning work takes time. We want to allow time and space for this new learning to develop and therefore inform the next revision of our Web presence.