WAC Meets TAC: WebCT Bulletin Boards as a Writing to Learn Technique

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Fall of 2000 seemed like the right time to introduce more technology into my undergraduate course Applied Child Development. Several forces came together to lead me to this decision. NCATE had encouraged teacher preparation courses to make more use of technology. The friendly folks at Information Technology Services were offering summer workshops on introducing WebCT into classes. The Computer Advisory Board (CAB) or the Technology Across the Curriculum (TAC) group— I've forgotten which, and I'm not sure I know the difference—was offering bribes, I mean honoraria, to people to make such innovations. And I was recovering from the experience of trying to teach the quietest group of students I'd ever encountered in one classroom, a group I had come to affectionately refer to as "mime school."

"Mime school" was my 8:00 a.m. section of Applied Child Development during Spring of 2000. There were only 12 students, and not an extravert in the bunch. Their written work was entirely satisfactory, better, in fact, than that produced by the very lively group of students I had in the 10:10 section, but they were the quietest group of people I've ever taught. Using every WAC trick I knew—journals, free writes, focussed lists—I was lucky if I could coax a single spoken sentence out of any of them. I eventually came to respect their introversion and let them quietly communicate with me in writing, but it saddened me that they weren't getting to hear one another's good ideas. When I heard that Jeannie Poterucha from Information Technology Services was offering a summer workshop on WebCT Bulletin Boards, the forces came together and I decided this might be the solution to my problem. I had heard a colleague talk about using electronic Bulletin Boards in one of his biology courses. I knew that they could be used to have students discuss course material on line.

At Jeannie's workshop I learned more. I learned, for example, the difference between an on-line bulletin board, where people post messages to be read whenever the others in the group happen to log on, and an on-line chat, which is more like a face-to-face conversation, but which requires all participants to be on line at once.

Jeannie has an infectious enthusiasm, and by the end of the workshop I had signed up to have my two sections of Applied Child Development in the fall be WebCT courses. I actually saw several uses of this technology in that course, but the one which excited me most was the Bulletin Board. I thought maybe this method of communication would appeal to the more introverted students.

I envisioned the Bulletin Board working a lot like in-class discussions. I would pose a stimulating question each week and students would give their opinions and respond to what others had already said. I hoped that those students too shy, self-conscious, or reflective to speak in class, might be liberated by this medium. Here was a chance to choose words carefully and edit comments before posting.

I saw as a secondary advantage that the technique would give us a chance to have more discussions. I never have time enough in class to discuss everything I want to. Getting through the basic material in the textbook seems to fill most class periods. In particular, we tend to never find enough time to discuss the articles in our supplementary book of readings, many of them reprinted articles from primary sources. I decided I would focus many of the Bulletin Board questions on these readings. I imagined that this would stimulate students to do the reading.

I decided that participation in the Bulletin Board would be required and graded. I realized that assessing the quality of each posting would not be feasible, but WebCT technology provides the instructor with several pieces of quantitative information that can be used as the basis for a grade: how many times each student has posted, how many postings the student has read, and how recently the student has visited the Bulletin Board.   When Jeannie visited the classes early in the semester to introduce WebCT and explain the Bulletin Board, she alerted students to these monitoring systems. I told the students they would be graded at the end of the semester on the basis of how many times they posted and how many postings they read. This grade was to be weighted the same as each other major assignment (exams, papers, journal) in determining their course grades.

In thinking about the function of the Bulletin Board assignment, I came to think of it as another WAC technique. Like with journals, Bulletin Board response is expressive writing to learn. For a while I was planning that first semester to have the Bulletin Board replace the journals I had always used in this course. The journals had been successful, and though I had always enjoyed reading the students' expressive writing, doing so had taken quite a lot of time. If I replaced the journals with the Bulletin Board, I could use that reading time for the new assignment, which had as an advantage over the journals that the students would get to read one another's entries. However, I realized that I had always based one of the papers in the course on the informal observations of children the students had recorded in their journals. Since I didn't want to give that up, I decided to make the Bulletin Board an additional assignment rather than an alternative to the journals.

That decision was probably a mistake, one of several I made that first semester of using an electronic Bulletin Board. A second was that I tried to have each section of the class engage in a single Bulletin Board discussion. One section that semester had an enrollment of 29 and the other was overenrolled at 41. Jeannie had warned me she had no idea whether a discussion would work in groups that large. A third mistake was supposing that a general question about a report of a research study would produce lively discussion and debate.

My plan for stimulating the discussion was to pose a question once a week to get a new conversational thread started. Some of the time these questions simply asked the students for an opinion. For example, I thought a non-threatening way to begin this conversation about human development would be to ask, "What is your favorite age? If you could go back to an age or forward to an age what would it be? Why?" More often the question was designed to stimulate discussion about one of the readings, for example, "Which of the findings in Palmer's study of refugee children in Australia during World War II surprised you the most?" Sometimes the question was about the reading, but really a personal opinion question, such as "What did you think about the practice of co-sleeping common in Mayan culture which we read about this week?" Students were expected to respond to each week's question (or to the responses others had already made). They were also encouraged to pose questions of their own to start other conversational threads.

In general, students did the Bulletin Board assignment. Most stu-

dents responded to most of the questions I posed. In each class several times during the semester, students initiated other conversations—one particularly lively and rather contentious one was about abortion—and many students contributed to those as well. Just about 50% of the students met the criteria I had established to earn an "A" for the Bulletin Board assignment: they contributed at least once a week and they read at least 75% of the postings. Most of the remainder came close enough to those criteria to receive a "B." In each class there were only a few non-participants who failed the assignment.

Because participation was so high, I had the impression during the semester that the Bulletin Board was working pretty well from the students' point of view. I quickly had reservations of my own, however. Between the two classes there were typically 50 or 60 entries a week, and I felt I had to read all these as well as the 70 or so journal entries a week these same students were producing. Reading the journal entries was more time consuming both because of physically handling the notebooks and because I usually make at least a minimal response to each entry. However, the journal entries were more varied and more interesting. The deadly part of the Bulletin Board was that everyone's entries were so much alike. To be frank, I found them really boring to read.

The opinion questions were somewhat more successful in producing variability and occasional dialog among the students. When the question was about what had been read, most of the students responded to the question and not to one another, and most said pretty much the same thing. I found these very tedious to read and could only imagine that the students must also.

That was confirmed in a big way by the results of the written evaluation of the Bulletin Board that I asked students to complete along with the course evaluation form. A majority of the students on the regular course evaluation form listed the Bulletin Board as the part of the course they liked the least. On the supplemental form they explained why. Their reservations were the same as mine: they were overwhelmed by all the responses they were expected to read and bored by the sameness of those responses. Many also reported that whereas they had at first enjoyed the Bulletin Board, they had grown tired of it as the semester wore on.

There were exceptions, however. A few students said they enjoyed the Bulletin Board, and many of these said they liked having a forum other than talking in class in which they could express their opinions.

"The mimes!" I thought. "There are indeed a subset of students who are more comfortable sharing their thoughts with one another in writing rather than orally." The desire to meet the needs of this subgroup had, after all, been what got me started on all this.

Ah, the power of partial reinforcement! Those few comments were enough encouragement to make me want to try again. Though the results of this first experiment had been largely negative, I opted to try to figure out how to improve the assignment rather than abandoning it.

Jeannie had told me that 71 faculty members used WebCT this year, and that of those more than 75% had used Bulletin Boards in one way or another. I asked Jeannie if she knew of people who might have had more positive experiences than I and she provided me with several names. I sent e-mails to these folks and got some insightful and helpful responses.

I was comforted to discover that other people had had some of the same problems I had had. Two colleagues from the English Department responded that the Bulletin Board had worked for a while and then quality of performance had dropped off. Andrew Symth put it this way:

> The Bulletin Board worked well for the first half of the semester in my Composition course last semester, but the students grew tired of it after the midterm point. Also, I had hoped that having students post responses to the readings before class would eliminate the need to give reading checks and quizzes, but the students quickly realized that they could read the other postings, respond in a similar fashion, and not even read the text to which they were responding.

Jeanne Dubino's response was similar:

> About the WebCT—it worked for the first part of the semester. I asked students to post a weekly response (no length specified) to the literature under discussion. I also asked them to post four responses to each other's postings. Students reported early on that they learned a lot from each other. They read each other's postings to figure out how to interpret the literature. They preferred to post their responses rather than hand in short typewritten responses. Things were promising.
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> But past the midway point of the semester, fewer than half of all the students bothered to post weekly responses. Though postings

> accounted for 40% of their grade, though I reminded them on a daily basis of that, though I cajoled, urged, threatened them to post, I just couldn't get them to do it.

> The quality was variable. A few students—about three or four—invariably (when they chose to post at all) wrote fine and insightful interpretations. Others must have spent all of about 5 minutes. The level of thought and work was definitely lower than what I see when I ask students to hand in written responses.

Others too expressed reservations about the quality of the writing in Bulletin Board entries. Pat Cantor, who had used the technique in her early childhood classes, put it this way:

> In all cases, I think the use of the Bulletin Board is writing to learn, not (by any means) learning to write. Something about the Bulletin Board format does not promote careful writing, even though I do ask for correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Perhaps it's too close to e-mail. In any case, I have found that the Bulletin Board encourages writing to learn.

Despite such reservations, all of my respondents, like me, seemed determined to keep working to make the Bulletin Board work. A comment by Ken Bergstrom summarizes this determination:

> I do think there's a learning curve for both the instructor and the student: the goal, as I see it, is to have the student grasp this opportunity to communicate, to enter into the design and product of the learning. Too many, however, respond to the Bulletin Board requirement as something they have to do, so they input minimally. Like the task of reading, some take to the Bulletin Board far better than others.

> Perhaps a correlation exists between one's confidence in compositional skills and one's willingness to commit to public scrutiny. However, if the Bulletin Board is encountered in many courses over a student's years at PSC, then I believe we will see far greater student commitment and a benefit accruing to upper-level courses in particular.

Some reported considerable success on the first try. Pat Cantor, for example, had found a way of solving the problem of having to read dozens of similar entries.

> Last semester, I posted several scenarios of typical preschool and kindergarten behavioral issues on the Bulletin Board, and asked each student to respond to one of the scenarios by explaining how they would deal with that particular situation (there were 6 scenarios and 18 students, and no more than 3 could respond to each scenario). After they had posted their responses, I asked them to respond to someone else's reply. This generated some good discussion among the students. I was particularly struck by how supportive the students were of each other.

Several folks had already made changes for the second semester designed to solve problems they had encountered during the first. Jeanne Dubino wrote:

> What am I doing differently for my two sections of Introduction to Literature this semester? I'm going to have students post 250-word responses only twice over the course of the semester. Posting will count as part of their short writing response grade (15%). I want all students to read the postings, but they do not have to post their responses. Hopefully, the decreased amount will lead to less resistance, and will ensure that the quality of all their writing is higher.

Pat Cantor is presently trying several variations:

> This semester, I am using the Bulletin Board in all three classes to post journal questions and other messages for the students. The students can choose whether they'd like to hand in their journals or post them on the Bulletin Board (they know that everyone else in the class can read a posting, so most choose to hand them in). I am not planning to use the Bulletin Board much for discussion, because, frankly, it would be a lot of work for me! The exception will be the graduate class, which is small.
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> One class (CD300) has an exam coming up on the 23rd. For their journal question this week, I'm going to ask them to generate a short essay question for the exam, answer it, and explain why it

would be a good exam question. I'm hoping that this will be a good way to review for the exam and will help me identify areas that they have a strong or weak understanding of. If this works, I'm thinking of expanding it to a Bulletin Board discussion for the next exam—students could generate questions and comment on each other's questions by way of review for the exam.

As for me, I too am using the Bulletin Board in an entirely new way in Applied Child Development this semester. Like Jeanne and Pat, I was looking for a way to limit its use so neither the students nor I would be overwhelmed by what we had to read. The first change I made was to divide each of the two large classes into subgroups of six or seven students each.

I also changed the purpose of the discussion, giving it the purpose the journal formerly had and eliminating the journal. Several students had complained it was too much informal writing to keep a journal and post on the Bulletin Board, and reading both was a burden for me. Now instead of responding to weekly questions from me, students are simply asked to post on the Bulletin Board what I used to require in the journal: reports of observations of children they make outside of class. They are also asked to comment on observations posted by the others in the group, whenever possible bringing ideas from the course to bear on interpreting the observation.

I knew from past experience with the journals that the students are likely to vary greatly in terms of how many opportunities they have to observe children outside of class. Some are parents living with children; others have regular contact with young siblings, nieces, or nephews; some are taking classes that require them to visit schools or the Child Development Center. At the start of the semester, I had the students free write for me about the extent to which they were likely to have contact with children this semester. I then contrived the groups in order to distribute those with many opportunities to observe children. Those with fewer opportunities to contribute observations are expected to compensate by making frequent comments about observations others have posted. Shortly after I announced the subgroups, one student made a suggestion that struck me as so brilliant that I took it at once: she asked that we take class time for each subgroup to meet once face-to-face to introduce themselves to one another, "so we will know who we are talking to."

I am happy to report that these changes seem to have had highly positive results. There are eight subgroups conversing, five in one section of the course and three in the other. Six of the eight groups took off immediately and began posting observations and comments. The comments do often have a conversational quality lacking last semester, when most students responded independently to the questions I asked. One group had a problem for a while: they were posting many observations, but no one was commenting. A member of the group pointed this out, and I prodded a bit in class, and they are now commenting as well as observing. One group remains quieter than I would like.

I am a member of all eight groups. I read all the postings and comment occasionally. Sometimes I give my own interpretation of an observation if the group has missed an opportunity to relate it to ideas in the course. More often my comments are meant to congratulate and encourage insightful comments. I try to read the Bulletin Boards three times a week and can usually accomplish that task in less than half an hour. This is less total time than reading the journals used to take and way less total time than I spent last semester trying to read both kinds of assignment. As was the case with the journals, the observations are varied and thus interesting for me to read.

I did not want to make the mistake I made last semester of assuming the students' attitude toward the Bulletin Board was positive. This semester I did a written anonymous evaluation after only five weeks. The results confirmed my perception that this time the assignment is working. A majority of the students reported they are enjoying the discussions, think they are worthwhile, and value the opportunity to communicate with their classmates. Of the less positive responses, most were complaints that it is difficult to remember to do the assignment. They asked that I mention the Bulletin Board more often in class to remind them, and I have tried to do that. The early evaluation also gave me a chance to prod the group that was not commenting to do so.

I am cautiously optimistic at this point that when structured appropriately the WebCT Bulletin Board can be regarded as a useful WAC technique. WAC meets TAC and students have another opportunity to write to learn.