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## ABSTRACT

### THE BLACKBOARD BARRIER: STUDENT AND TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE BLACKBOARD LEARNING SYSTEM

Utilizing interview and survey methodologies, this paper seeks better appreciation for how first-year composition students at California State University, Fresno, perceive the use of the Blackboard Learning System as a supplement to English 1 class meetings. This study is a direct result of student comments, both positive and negative, made to myself and other English 1 and 1LA teaching assistants during the 2004-05 and 2005-06 academic years.

Students enter CSUF with a broad range of technical skills. Some also experience issues of access to computing resources. This study quantifies student perceptions of the Blackboard system as it relates to English 1 via a lexical analysis of interviews and surveys. English 1 teaching assistants were also interviewed and surveyed to quantify their perceptions of Blackboard. Comparing the perceptions of these two groups, this paper examines how divergent sets of perceptions result in students resisting the use of online technologies.

Christopher Scott Wyatt  
May 2006



THE BLACKBOARD BARRIER: STUDENT AND TEACHER  
PERCEPTIONS OF THE BLACKBOARD  
LEARNING SYSTEM

by

Christopher Scott Wyatt

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submitted in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2004, the composition program at California State University, Fresno (CSUF) began to mandate the use of the online network application known as the Blackboard Learning System for the first-year writing course, English 1. According to one composition director at CSUF, the use of Blackboard was motivated, in part, by a desire to figure out ways to open the classroom to students who often feel marginalized in traditional classroom settings. As one of the English 1 teaching assistants (TAs), I was one of many course instructors who initially embraced this philosophy. However, as I began to employ the system I experienced first-hand the problems arising when instructors, in their enthusiasm for the democratizing possibilities associated with online communities and network technologies, do not consider the struggles their students encounter attempting to use online writing technologies.

During casual discussions with other instructors of English 1, Beginning College Writing, I came to realize I was not the only instructor whose students were struggling, in unexpected ways, with the networking technologies we employed. Online writing and collaboration were not

achieving our desired results. I began to wonder why our initial, collective, enthusiasms for the democratizing possibilities of network technologies were unrealized. Concerns about the limitations of computer technologies are, of course, not new to composition studies. For over fifteen years, critical educators like Todd Taylor, Gail Hawisher, Cynthia Selfe, and, more recently, Barbara Monroe, have offered cautionary admonitions regarding the liberatory potential of computer technologies. While these scholars offer useful theoretical ideas regarding online technologies in the writing course (Taylor, Hawisher, Selfe) and ethnographic analysis of "K-12" uses of technology, there has been little ethnographic analysis of the ways university students and instructors perceive specific technologies like Blackboard.

In response to the lack of scholarly attention to these increasingly popular interfaces and, more importantly, to the negative comments of instructors and students alike, I decided to conduct research that would provide a compositionists at CSUF and nationally, a richer understanding of the problems involved in networking technologies like Blackboard and the ways we might rethink existing critical pedagogies--possibly creating foundations for revised pedagogies. Through a combination of interviews, surveys, and ethnographic analysis of teaching assistants and students during the 2004-05 and 2005-06

academic years, I have sought to address the gap between instructors' preconceptions of such technologies as tools that may be employed to democratize the classroom and student perceptions--in their own words--of the challenges they face when using Blackboard on a day-to-day basis. As I will discuss in this thesis, this research points to a combination of related factors that I categorize under the headings access, navigational tools, social issues, and pedagogical concerns. These headings mark a particular progression experienced by students as they move from "simple" issues of accessing the networked writing community through the complications of weak or nonexistent critical pedagogies for the use of online applications. Ultimately, I will argue for increased pedagogical attention to training and implementation. It is essential that rationales are explored as part of the teaching assistant coursework, especially in courses required of composition graduate students. Until we address training and pedagogical foundations for online writing systems, it is likely that first-year writing students will remain ambivalent towards technologies like Blackboard.

#### Critical Technological Pedagogy

As I have suggested, while this study focuses on the local context of the composition program at CSUF, the analyses and results draw on and seek to contribute to a

growing body of scholarship on the uses of online and networked technologies in the writing classroom, particularly as they relate to attempts to democratize the composition course. My research follows students from issues of access, which many lack, through the classroom and online practices of instructors. By concluding with a focus on critical pedagogies, this study culminates with an analysis of the philosophies teaching assistants bring into the classroom and online content. Previous studies have likewise focused on issues of pedagogy, but often without supporting empirical data.

Much of this work, I would argue, has sought to address, through the introduction of "critical" approaches to technology, a tendency to perceive online writing and collaboration in binary, pro-technology/anti-technology terms. Hawisher and Selfe, for instance, foresaw problems with embracing technology uncritically--even before we moved content to the World Wide Web and developed classroom interfaces like Blackboard. In 1991, in their article "The Rhetoric of Technology and the Electronic Writing Class" appearing in College Composition and Communication, these researchers cautioned compositionists against a tendency to speak and write of "the effects of technology" in overly positive terms as if computers were good in and of themselves. (130)

Hawisher and Selfe focus particular attention on "talk about computer use in uncritical terms" (135). Whereas the field of composition has a longstanding tradition of circulating "best practices," in journal articles and at national conferences like the CCCC, Hawisher and Selfe usefully caution against the tendency "to dwell on the best parts, to tell stories about the best classroom moments, and to feature the more positive findings about computers" (135). This tendency to laud the positive anecdote is difficult to resist, but these theorists recognize we must resist assumptions. "Rather," they suggest, "we must begin to identify the ways in which technology can fail us" (135).

Hawisher and Selfe indicate that this admonition should not be read as anti-technological. I would argue that this often quoted admonition can be understood as a means of forestalling a tendency we will see in the responses of teaching assistants at CSUF to perceive the uses of computer technologies in either/or formulations. In essence, a critical approach to technology that takes seriously the "ways in which [it] can fail us" may help prevent the common tendency among English 1 instructors to jettison Blackboard as soon as it becomes clear that things are not going as well as "best practices" may have suggested they would.

Though he doesn't employ the term, Todd Taylor usefully extends the concern of Hawisher and Selfe for a "critical" approach to a more specific focus on the social effects of computers in the classroom.

In his 1997 article, "The Persistence of Difference in Networked Classrooms," Taylor complicates this "critical" approach by arguing against those who view technology as an instrument of oppression. Taylor is particularly critical of those who assume that "because [computer technologies] obscure some culturally marked, extra-linguistic cues such as body language, tone of voice, and oral dialect that tend to favor those in dominant groups" (117).

Whereas Taylor is interested in challenging perceptions of computers as instruments of dominant groups, he is even more concerned with overly optimistic narratives about their social effects. Writing in response to Lester Faigley's seminal argument, "Achieved Utopias," and to a lesser extent, the works of Selfe and Marilyn Cooper, Taylor suggests that compositionists

sometimes pacify ourselves with the hopes of negotiating difference [through an]abundance of talk about how networked interchanges can help negotiate difference. (117)

For Taylor the "sunny, liberal, will-to-overcome-difference" is appealing but ultimately, "not realistic" (113).

Despite the appeals of Taylor and others, the use of Blackboard within English 1 was similarly characterized by a split between those who viewed it as a useful means for "negotiating difference" and those who viewed it as yet another instrument of oppression. When we began to use Blackboard at CSUF, many of the instructors within the composition program, including myself, embraced its potential to unsettle problematic power dynamics. Like the early work of Cooper, Selfe, and Faigley, we felt that online networks would enable access for students who are marginalized in the traditional classroom. Others, however, resented the mandate to use the technology. While the reasons this resistance varied, many of the teaching assistants viewed it as another imposition "from on high."

It would be easy to attribute the optimism of teaching assistants at CSUF to a kind of naïveté characteristic of new teachers with more experience with computers than experience teaching or exposure to scholarship in composition. Indeed, many of my fellow teaching assistants were new to the classroom and, with the exception of a required practicum in composition pedagogy, had little exposure to the scholarship of theorists like Selfe and Taylor. I suspect, however, that lack of experience and exposure to writing pedagogy offers only partial explanation for the gap between instructor and student perceptions. Indeed, the enthusiasm of the composition

program leadership points to optimism among experienced instructors; the decision to make Blackboard mandatory for all teaching associates was made by composition faculty who had considerable experience teaching and researching computers and writing. While Blackboard was new to many teaching associates who, prior to the change in policy resisted using it, some of the most resistant teaching associates and adjunct instructors were those who had firsthand experiences with Blackboard. In many instances, these instructors suggested that the technology did not work the way that it was supposed to or that it was just a gimmick that interfered with, rather than facilitated, writing instruction.

Those English 1 instructors who had some experience with Blackboard and who resisted the mandate to use it occasionally spoke for students who struggled with access and navigational tools. What was missing from many of the early conversations, however, was the kind of research conducted recently by Barbara Monroe examining how students perceived the use of network technologies within a writing course. In Crossing the Digital Divide, Monroe offers an analysis of the ways historically disenfranchised students communicate using e-mail. Part of her study focuses on a series of exchanges between Detroit high school students and "cybermentors" at the University of Michigan. This method of analysis is particularly useful because, as

Monroe suggests, it focuses on student perceptions in their own words.

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer a thorough recounting of Monroe's provocative study, her research provides insights that help frame the current study. In language echoing Taylor's critical focus, Monroe argues against the common assumption that computer technologies occlude differences of race, class, and gender. Indeed, Monroe, echoing Butler, concludes "power hierarchies online tend to reconstitute along the same race, class, and gender lines as those in the traditional classroom" (83). According to Monroe, who cites W. Butler's 1992 study of student language and educational settings, while physical features that code difference are not present in e-mail,

linguistic adeptness required in the academy matches the verbal behavior of the ruling elite and dominates online discussions, especially in the physical absence of a professor to control whose views are weighted and whose views are not.  
(83)

Monroe's conclusions may surprise those who have called attention to the ways in which the "body matters" in negotiating differences along lines of race, class, and gender. I suspect, moreover, that while many social differences are maintained in e-mail, more research is

needed to address the distinctions between physical and virtual communication in this area. Monroe's attention to linguistic codes, however, serves as a useful reminder to the teaching assistants and instructors at CSUF, where the student population is comprised of immigrant populations from the Pacific Rim, particularly Laos, and Latin America, particularly the eastern states of Mexico.

More important for the purposes of this study is Monroe's insistence on both technology and critical pedagogy. Rather than ignoring technology on the basis of its problems or embracing it as an unproblematic panacea, Monroe challenges us to remember that "one cannot practice a critical pedagogy in the electronic age without using two-way communication technologies" (70). Conversely, she suggests that one ought not employ technologies without a critical pedagogy. As she suggests,

. . . . we need to always bear in mind that the venues of class discussion--in class or online--are complimentary rather than competing pedagogies. The centrifugal force of the online discussion, which accounts for its openness and near 100 percent participation rate, can be re-centered and focused by the centripetal force of in-class, whole-class discussion. (80)

It is useful to note that Monroe's "near 100 percent participation rate" for online discussions does not reflect

the reality experienced by many CSUF composition instructors, whose students often cite access as the reason for any failure to participate. However, this difference in experiences reinforces, rather than challenges, the need for more localized research on the perceptions of students and instructors. As my own experiences teaching at CSUF suggest, such differences in perception are critical if we are to develop critical pedagogies that are responsive to the lived experiences of the students we are teaching.

#### Personal Experiences

Before I introduce the study, I will briefly return to the local circumstances that influence instructor and student perceptions of Blackboard. As I have suggested, this study is concerned with the ways we might employ computer technologies to democratize the educational experiences of the students we teach. The teaching assistants and faculty at CSUF involved in the composition program seek to give equal weight to the experiences and opinions of all students in our classes. We want every student to have an opportunity to "be heard" and appreciated. The goal is that every student will feel equal in standing, regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion, or economic standing. Yet, students can and do establish perceptions of rank the moment they enter our classrooms. In the physical classroom, students recognize clothing

brands, fashion codes, personal possessions, and other indicators of social rank.

Many of the students enrolled in English 1 at CSUF are the first in their families to attend a university; a significant number are also second-language learners. As instructors, we must deal with cultural and economic factors.

Table 1

Profile of CSUF Student Population, as of 2004

---

Total enrollment	19,056
Undergraduate enrollment	15,413
<u>Percent of undergraduate enrollment by gender</u>	
Men	44%
Women	56%
<u>Undergraduate enrollment by race/ethnicity</u>	
Black non-Hispanic	5%
Asian or Pacific Islander	11%
Hispanic	27%
White non-Hispanic	40%

---

Source: U.S. College Search; Information provided by the National Center for Education Statistics and the Carnegie Foundation

In our attempts to ameliorate these differences, we often turn to computers and, more specifically, "the network" ideal, as a space promising greater equality and participation. Separated from visual and aural cues, we assume students who might otherwise be reluctant to participate in classroom discussions will find online forums liberating. Taylor writes:

[T]he most current scholarship in the field is not merely about a "consideration of difference" but about the persistence of issues of difference in every aspect of culture, even online. To date, a significant amount of work has examined the persistence of difference online. (114)

This assumption of democratization is influenced by scholarship in composition and rhetoric that points to some of the liberatory possibilities of technology. While there is certainly a role for theory, pragmatism demands that pedagogical theories be tested in some manner. The problem is that there is an allure of technology that makes it difficult to delay widespread implementation in composition courses. It is a seemingly small step from word processing to network collaboration; composition programs are under a great deal of pressure to take this step.

The introduction of Blackboard within the CSUF first-year composition program was informed by the literacy goals articulated by theorists such as Hawisher and Selfe.

Composition theorists now argue that the ubiquity of online technologies in social discourse suggests that teaching students to write and collaborate online should be part of all composition courses. These scholars are correct to suggest our students and future generations are more likely to communicate via e-mail than traditional letters and read news online instead of in newspapers. Academic peer-review journals and major publications have been online for over two decades, so the trend towards online distribution has been clear for some time. Yet, as John Trimbur suggests, composition theorists and instructors too often adhere to the expectations and rationales of a print-based culture, ignoring the possibilities or, as Kress and Van Leeuwen call them, the "affordances" of new media technologies.

Because of their exposure to these popular, idealistic theories of online composition and collaboration, many teaching assistants perceive university-purchased applications like the Blackboard Learning System positively, primarily as a means to facilitate democratic classroom practices. Teaching assistants also consider online systems an appropriate response to the increased emphasis on technologies as professional and social means of communication. Blackboard, we tend to believe, provides one of the important means through which we can effectively indicate to our composition students that we recognize the evolving state of personal, business, and academic writing,

as well as the influence visual technologies have on the ways our students participate in daily life. However, my experiences suggest that if we are to realize the literacy goals associated with networking technologies, we need to develop pedagogical practices that better account for the complex perceptions and experiences of the students using them.

My own biases contributed to my embrace of technology in the composition course. I operate World Wide Web sites, online discussion forums, and Listservs outside the academic setting. I tend to view technology as a tool for empowerment. As something of a technophile, I was initially enthusiastic that the composition program forcefully encourages use of Blackboard. At the beginning of the fall 2004 semester, I developed a series of assignments that required student engagement with Blackboard and incorporated a series of links to online resources that, I was confident, would foster meaningful practices in reading and writing. Early in the semester, however, I began to hear students complaining about their struggles with the interface. This was expected, to some extent. Students at all levels often experience frustrations with new technologies that they do not understand. Blackboard was perceived by teaching assistants as presenting such a "user friendly" interface that I assumed that early resistance

would quickly give way as students gained a functional literacy with the technology.

I grew increasingly concerned, however, by the persistence and variety of student complaints. While some students appeared to have few problems posting to discussion boards, others talked of the extra work involved in gaining access to the system. Others described difficulties downloading assignments, with repeated attempts to access documents recorded in the logs of Blackboard. The fact usage logs indicated students were, without a doubt, at least attempting to use Blackboard posed a serious challenge to my assumptions. One of the strengths of Blackboard is that it maintains records of when each student accesses various parts of the system; repeated access to the same areas seems to give credence to student complaints about access difficulties.

Some of the students, moreover, indicated that they found the interface slow and cumbersome. So, once online and connected, interface issues became the next barrier to Blackboard usage within composition. As a frequent user of online forums, I was surprised and admittedly suspicious of these complaints. While there were certainly occasions when the CSUF network server was unavailable, I had little difficulty with speed and navigation. I found some of the navigation of Blackboard counterintuitive, but any concerns I had regarding the interface usability seemed minor.

Instead of listening to the complaints of students, my colleagues and I often focused our attention on "problem" students. It is much easier to assume that students are not making an effort to learn the system than to admit the system suffers significant flaws. In part, this is because of the widespread use of Blackboard and similar tools. It is difficult to imagine hundreds of universities would adopt a tool that was not the best example of an online collaborative environment.

As the midterm break of the spring 2005 semester approached, I had heard enough complaints that I did what, in retrospect, I should have done closer to the beginning of the semester: I asked my students to write about their experiences accessing and navigating the Blackboard Learning System. I came to understand that the struggles with access were more pervasive than I had anticipated. I had expected young students to be comfortable with and active within an online academic community. Instead, for every positive reaction there was at least an equally negative reaction, if not more negative. In fact, I am forced to admit that even the "positive" or "neutral" responses to my query included complaints about the structure and design of Blackboard.

### Types of Student Concerns

Reading student responses to my initial in-class question, I came to recognize four distinct areas of complaint: issues of access, complexity of navigation, social concerns, and pedagogical failings. Each one of these areas demands exploration, but my concern at the time was why teaching assistants, including myself, had such divergent perceptions when compared to our students. Our idealistic embrace of an online system had caused a serious chasm to develop between instructors and students. Within a semester or two, instructors seemed to temper their idealism into a simple pragmatism. It was suggested to me by other instructors that it was more than pragmatism; there is almost a cynical disenchantment that develops when the use of Blackboard as a complement to English 1 fails to generate the democratic participation we envision as possible.

### Further Investigation Leading to the Research

In an effort to understand student resistance to the Blackboard Learning System, I asked students in my fall 2005 English 1 course to respond to their Blackboard experiences via a Blackboard forum. The paradox implicit in this request, in which I was asking students to assess a technology via the same technology, escaped me at the time. In some ways, this is equivalent to having students write

about writing. The theory is that having students reflect on the process is somehow going to encourage a deeper self-examination.

What I should have recognized was that I was communicating my own enthusiasm for the technology within my request for an online response. I was not only engaging in a traditional pedagogy, but I was using it to "sell" my students on the use of Blackboard. It was as if I was hoping they would come to see how easy and beneficial the system was as they used it. I think this paradox helps understand why it is difficult for composition instructors who are interested in technology to adequately assess student perceptions of technology. The desire to utilize an online collaboration system, even when we are asking students to assess their perceptions of the technology, points to the perceptual gap that this paper seeks to understand. In addition, those of us who have used such technologies for years have naturalized some of the conventions; we fail to remember our earlier struggles with application interfaces. More importantly for the purposes of this study are the perceptions of teaching assistants, who themselves have a range of experiences with technologies. As a group, we have failed to appreciate the complicated question of student access, a term that, as Grabill, Monroe, and others have argued, must be understood

in terms that account for, but are not limited to, having a access to a networked computer.

In response to these and other concerns, I have felt compelled to ask myself difficult questions regarding the manner in which my own ingrained assumptions about the possibilities of technology may have inhibited my ability to accept and address the reasons students in my classes did not share my enthusiasm for the Blackboard Learning System. Write Hawisher and Selfe:

Along with becoming acquainted with current composition theory, instructors, for example, must learn to recognize that the use of technology can exacerbate problems characteristic of American classrooms. It must continue to seek ways of using technology that equitably support all students in writing classes. All too frequently, however, writing instructors incorporate computers into their classes without the necessary scrutiny and careful planning that the use of any technology requires. (129)

I believe that my own interest in Web-based technologies distracts me; I have an emotional investment in the successful use of network applications within composition and rhetoric. Was I so determined to use these network technologies that I was unable to consider the possibility that students might feel alienated from the

network, even after they may have gained the basic level of functional literacy required for Blackboard?

This question and the concerns of students cannot be exhaustively addressed through surveys of students and instructors. However, the surveys and methodologies that I have employed, in concert with additional interviews and observations, provide some important insights into the ways we might better understand the difficulties our students have with computer applications that we often identify as "user friendly."

If I had not listened to my students, and had I not engaged in some heated discussions with other teaching assistants, this paper would not have evolved as it has. My experiences with Blackboard have encouraged me to consider how any online assignment might be perceived by students. Composing this paper has influenced my teaching by encouraging more in-class discussion of online interactions. It is my hope that my experiences have produced a study that will reshape how other instructors consider implementing online communities and collaboration within first-year composition classes.

## Chapter 2

### METHODOLOGY

To better understand the gap between instructor perceptions and student experiences surrounding the Blackboard Learning System, I employed a variety of data collection methods. This paper includes ethnographic observations, traditional survey results, and a lexical analysis of transcripts from "freewriting" and in-person interviews. Often, I felt it was important to seek clarification via interviews with groups of instructors or students. Since surveys and written responses were anonymous, group discussions provided important insights and guidance.

#### Instructor Surveys and Interviews

I surveyed and conducted interviews with 16 teaching assistants assigned to English 1 sections; these individuals led 64 course sections during the 2005-06 academic year. Survey questions dealt with Blackboard usage habits, including what materials instructors made accessible online, if the instructor used online discussion forums, and if the instructor had attempted to customize Blackboard for his or her course. The survey included an open-ended evaluation of Blackboard. Instructors were asked

to list any favorite features or their greatest complaints regarding the system. Answers to questions were entered into a survey database, providing the basis for analysis within this report (Appendix A, "Instructor Survey").

I included a section in the instructor survey listing specific word processor usage habits and skills, including but not limited to spelling and grammar checking, document templates, document analysis, paragraph styles, macros, and revision tools. This section of the survey is a potential starting point for a future paper; I believe we need to understand and appreciate how composition instructors use technology in contrast to how our students use technology. Also, most instructors and students indicated they resorted to using word processors for composing content meant for Blackboard. There are many reasons for this use of external applications, which are explored later in this paper.

#### Student Surveys and Interviews

Student surveys began with unrestricted freewriting, which was employed for the responses from 89 students enrolled in English 1, Beginning College Writing. The students were asked to reflect on Blackboard and describe their experiences with the system. I was pleased to find that students responded at length, often using the bulk of a response to explore their emotional responses to the online system. Few students used the responses to describe

procedural experiences or technical issues. That students were more likely to discuss emotional reactions to Blackboard provides an interesting starting point for analysis. Clearly, student relationships with online applications are as much emotional as technical.

The student responses were mapped via lexical analysis to a prepared survey form. Lexical analysis was performed via "coding" with the TAMS Analyzer (TA) from Kent State University. TA searches large sets of transcripts to reveal patterns or locate particular phrases of interest. In this survey, I looked for evidence of computing experience, online experiences, and perceptions of Blackboard. Lexical analysis can ascribe a numeric value to responses based on their "tone." For example, each student paper was assigned a response tone value regarding Blackboard itself. Values ranged from 1 to 5, with a score of 5 representing an overwhelmingly positive review of Blackboard. As with all lexical analyses, the overall response tone scoring is partially subjective based on which keywords were judged positive or negative. Also, the results do rely on the student response length and detail; longer responses provide more facts and opinions from which to draw a response tone. As a statistical check on the validity of the survey, I established a median and mean response tone. I counted the number of extreme scores, which were ascribed

numbers 1 and 5, to determine if the mean was reflective of a genuine distribution curve.

### Limitations

As Cynthia Selfe has argued, composition theorists need to address the local circumstances as well as the broader social movements that influence technological literacies, and this study reflects one attempt to respond to this challenge. A focus on local circumstances, however, begs the question of the degree to which the problems identified in this study resonate with the experiences of students and instructors in different locations or even in the local environment. The ethnographic and statistical analyses in this paper exemplify the concerns scholars face in our attempts to address the "local and particular."

### Sample Sizes and Implications

The fact that students who supplied the primary source of analysis came from the classes of four instructors may tell us a good deal about these students and instructors, but the researcher should remain mindful of the limitations of such a specific sample. More than 2,500 students enroll in English 1 each academic year. A random sample of 89 students is considered representative if the sample pool characteristics mirror the characteristics of the larger community. It is my belief there is both internal and external validity due to the random nature of this survey.

Table 2

Enrollment Figures for English 1 during the Survey Period.

---

2004-05 Academic Year

Fall 2004:        60 sections        1,440 enrolled

Spring 2005:    49 sections        1,048 enrolled

2005-06 Academic Year

Fall 2005:        59 sections        1,452 enrolled

Spring 2006:    52 sections        1,106 enrolled

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Source: CSUF Department of English, May 2006

It is important to note that the average teaching assistant teaches three sections of English 1 per academic year, according to the CSUF English Department. Assuming this average applies to the teaching assistants interviewed for this paper, these instructors might be responsible for 48 sections of English 1 per year--approximately 43 percent of the course sections offered during the 2005-06 academic year.

Additionally, while surveys and interviews of 89 students and 16 instructors provide some important insights about the uses of networking technologies, particularly at CSUF, such analyses should be viewed as starting points for future studies. Studies that are more extensive are necessary to assess whether the experiences and perceptions detected in the research for this paper reflect local or national trends.

Paradoxically, the source of some of the most useful data--open-ended responses parsed through a lexical analysis--is also the area of most concern with respect to applicability of the conclusions. Certainly, face-to-face interviews and open-ended questions produce insights that are unattainable via most other research methods. I must acknowledge that the lack of a structured survey increases the potential subjectivity of analysis and lexical analysis that relies on a theoretical equivalency in meaning constitutes an inexact means for assessing the data. Lexical analysis is, in theory, unbiased because a software application returns results. However, a researcher must code the search terms and assign the terms values. Unfortunately, the intent of a respondent often goes beyond the literal or the literal is expressed imprecisely, resulting in statistical assumptions that might be misleading. Software cannot make assumptions, nor can it read "deeply" for intention.

For example, if a student writes "Blackboard is difficult to use," analysis requires that the software score the response tone as "negative." The precise nature of "difficult" depends on two levels of categorical assessment. The first, interpretive assessment, is performed by the researcher who develops the lexical scale around key terms. The second, statistical assessment,

relies, more problematically, on the program itself as it mines the transcripts to generate data.

Methods like lexical analysis should be treated carefully because they may appear to imply a positivist means to determine meaning. The lessons of post structuralism have, for good reason, challenged such positivist inclinations; the researcher is well advised to remain vigilant to tendencies to view lexical analysis as a way of blurring the distinction between subjective and objective assumptions about the conclusions. Yet, the cautions of post-enlightenment theorists do not mandate that we avoid the use of empirical statistical analysis, a tendency that, I suspect, discourages some potentially useful methods. In this study, I have used lexical analysis as a heuristic that supplies additional data for researcher analysis and consideration. Read in relation to survey responses, therefore, lexical analysis provides one more vantage point for considering the way individuals express perceptions of experiences with technology. The paradox inherent in this lexical analysis is only partially addressed, as any analysis of indeterminate language could be, through careful analysis.

## Chapter 3

### PRIMARY SURVEY AND INTERVIEW RESULTS

While I have suggested some English 1, Beginning College Writing, instructors adopt the use of the Blackboard Learning System with an idealistic zeal, by the spring semesters of 2005 and 2006 when I conducted instructor surveys this zeal had faded. Yet, there was still a stark difference in perceptions of Blackboard between CSUF students and first-year composition teaching assistants. The following statistical results and accompanying personal reflections raise a number of questions regarding the use of Blackboard. My comments reflect my experiences as an English 1 instructor, as well as my newfound awareness of student perceptions.

What emerges from analysis of the perceptions of instructors and students in their uses of networking technologies? I think we must be careful to remember that students responded more forcefully when they had negative views of the system. Should these negative reactions be given additional weight by composition instructors and theorists? How should we understand the comments of individuals for whom Blackboard served different purposes? And what lessons might analysis of the stated perceptions provide for a critical pedagogy aiming to open, rather than

limit, access to collaborative online writing networks and to the academy itself?

This study revealed issues I have not anticipated relating to access to the CSUF network, student frustrations with the application interface, complex social factors, and the lack of appropriate critical pedagogical practices for the context specific to the CSUF population. Too often instructors adopt teaching strategies based on scholarly literature emerging from studies of more homogenous or economically privileged student populations. I now question how existing scholarship can be applied to CSUF and similar institutions throughout the country. The profile of our student population is not unique to one region.

Like many of my colleagues, I began with a "blind faith" in the transformative effects of technologies, particularly for those students who too often feel alienated from the conventions of academic discourse. My own use of technology as a student, as well as my past vocation as a programmer and Web designer, influenced me more than any composition theories--but the effects were the same. I imagined students, especially of the first generation born into an online society, would share my enthusiasms. There were other instructors, of course, who were considerably less sanguine about the possibilities of new media technologies. In many ways, the initial

receptions of Blackboard reflected the variety and complexity of responses to technology in contemporary society and it is impossible (and ill advised) to reduce these perspectives to easy technophile/technophobe dichotomies.

#### Different Internet User Communities

Many instructors, including myself, assume that current undergraduate students are more "wired" and experienced with Internet technologies than we are. This assumption, I now realize, is mistaken. Because we have used technology as part of our professional duties, we might be more comfortable with the World Wide Web and collaborative applications than our students. Simply having been born into a society with widespread reliance on network technologies does not guarantee a familiarity or comfort with those same technologies.

As an example of different usage patterns, only 2.25 percent of students report having a personal Web site, while 31.25 percent of instructors maintain a Web site. Blackboard requires a familiarity with Web technologies and even includes support for basic Web page HTML coding. It is possible that when instructors have this skill, they are likely to assume students are also familiar with Web design. Even in the use of "social networks" such as MySpace or Yahoo 360, instructors have a slight lead at

this time. The 14.61 percent of students reporting the use of a social network were slightly surpassed by the 18.75 percent of instructors using similar Web portals.

Discussions I conducted with groups of CSUF students reflect these usage patterns. While most were familiar with MySpace and Facebook, they indicated issues of access limited the ability to frequent these popular Web sites.

It must be remembered that CSUF represents a particular student population profile. However, I believe this student population is mirrored at similar public institutions. This survey represents student experiences at this particular moment, when access to high-speed connections remains expensive and not every household possesses a personal computer.

#### Introduction to Study Findings

Assessing student responses to technologies presents a number of challenges. The analysis that follows focuses on the gap between instructor perceptions and student experiences. Despite these perceptual differences, it is important to note that neither group views Blackboard as having a significant effect on student-instructor relations. On a scale of 1 to 5, student response tone averaged a 3.28 in this study with a median of 3.00. In other words, students viewed Blackboard as insignificant in terms of relations with instructors. In many ways, the

findings that follow attempt to address this primary insight. Not a single student response mentioned improvements to writing as result of using Blackboard. This should deeply trouble composition instructors, assuming the goal of network technologies within the writing class is to help students improve composition skills. However, a significant portion student responses included criticisms of Blackboard.

Instructors were more enthusiastic than students, even after two or more semesters of teaching English 1. Of 16 instructors, 9 indicated a belief that Blackboard improves relations with students and therefore improves the quality of composition instruction. One instructor indicated Blackboard "brings more students into the conversation," but the instructor admitted she did not know if actual writing skills were improved. However, if a clear majority of instructors do not view Blackboard as improving relations with students, has Blackboard merely replaced traditional modes of student response? The students with positive views of Blackboard were more likely to comment on its convenience than on academic concerns.

Maybe it is only natural for students to be concerned with convenience. The problems students experience with Blackboard indicate the system becomes a hindrance to productivity, so any potential benefits relating to course content are sacrificed. The issues affecting Blackboard

dominate perceptions. I have collected student and instructor perceptions under the headings of Access, Usability (Navigation), Social Concerns, and Pedagogy. Under each heading statistical results are accompanied by quotes from research participants and personal reflections.

#### Issues of Access

As Barbara Monroe has usefully argued in her study of writing and technology in Detroit and among Native American tribes in the Pacific Northwest, the issues of computer access present a particularly complicated challenge to scholars who seek to employ them for critical pedagogy (Monroe 70). Like Monroe, I have found access a useful concept for understanding. But while Monroe focuses on access as a means to understanding rhetorical patterns among different groups as they employ technology, I am most interested here in assessing perceptions of a specific technology. Issues of race and gender are beyond the scope of this analysis. As I will argue later, one of the important implications of this study is the need for future scholarship that addresses how the patterns I identify here are implicated in cultural differences.

I definitely believe the socioeconomic status of students attending CSUF and similar campuses across the nation must be considered. There is evidence not only of cultural issues relating to access opportunities, but there

is a definite correlation between economic standing and the ability to afford the high-speed, broadband access necessary to make the use of an online writing situation practical. As one respondent stated, a dial-up connection "sucks" when using Blackboard.

The interviews and freewrite responses provided by students reveal the depth of access issues at CSUF. A startling 26.97 percent of students reported issues connecting to the Blackboard system. Far more troubling, from the perspective of a CSUF instructor relying on the system, 31.46 percent reported technical problems with the Blackboard application.

Instructor surveys revealed approximately 62.50 percent of instructors utilize Blackboard in some manner, but less than half of the instructors use Blackboard as a regular supplement to course instruction or to provide feedback to students. If one in four students have issues connecting to the system and nearly one in three have problems with the system once connected, we must carefully evaluate requirements to use the system. It is not logical to base student grades on the use of a Web-based application that does not function as expected or to which many students lack access.

Online Connection Issues

Unfortunately, a small, but significant, population of CSUF students lack direct access to personal computers. These students are forced to use laptops checked out from the library, with 50 systems currently available, or use one of the public terminals located in campus labs. It should be noted that the English Department does not have a dedicated lab, nor is there a public access lab in the same building as the English Department. During the spring semester of 2005, the CSUF library was closed for mandated repairs, upgrades, and renovations. Until that time, many of the instructors had assumed students had easy access to online connections. Suddenly, students were forced to inform their instructors that not every first-year student owns a computer or has access to one. As one experienced teaching assistant noted:

Since the library closed, it's a lot harder for some students to access the system. I don't use Blackboard as much as in the past after realizing how hard it is for students who don't have their own computers.

The library issue was mentioned by several students and instructors. "I think that Blackboard was stupid only because I didn't have a computer," one student confessed. The student did attempt to utilize the library laptops, "But do you know how hard it is to get a laptop or computer

around campus?" The university either did not anticipate the demand for computer access or did not consider the lack of terminals a major concern. Interestingly, only the one instructor made a sympathetic comment regarding access during the survey process. Others were either unsympathetic or did not mention student concerns regarding access.

One instructor said he has had students withdraw from his English 1 sections after they realize how heavily he relies on Blackboard. Another instructor told me she thought accessing Blackboard prepared students for their future professional lives. Neither seemed concerned that they were using Blackboard as a filter, allowing some students to pursue a university education while blocking others from participation. In my own experience, at least one student in each English 1 section I have conducted has lacked access to a computer at home. Many of these students also work part-time or even full-time and are not able to wait for access to a system on campus.

Students in these situations are likely to feel unfairly penalized within the English 1 course. Students admitted to missing assignments because they could not access Blackboard. A student who missed assignments several times wrote, "I'd rather be told what I have to do in class or in the syllabus." This sentiment was echoed in numerous responses, including a student who wrote, "What I hate about Blackboard is. . . it's online. If you don't have

access to the Internet you can't do your work." Writing for many of the students juggling work and classes, a student complained:

It was awful. I could not find enough time to go to class and get on the Internet. . . I ended up not getting online enough, I missed assignments, things were passing me by and I didn't even know it.

I believe this is a serious issue, which too many instructors are dismissing. When pressed on this matter, one instructor stated, "The university makes it clear you need a computer. If they can afford video games and the latest clothes, it's a matter of priorities." While there might be some validity to such attitudes, is it the responsibility of a teaching assistant to judge students? I think we must be careful when assuming students are negligent in their spending habits, considering how many are working to pay for their educations. The lack of a computer or high-speed online connection at home might be a genuine issue of affordability.

As a case in point, even when a student does own a computer, the Internet connection speed affects the usability of a graphical Web-based application such as Blackboard. Students and instructors have experienced this problem. One student wrote, "Having a lot of online homework when your Internet is slow is painful for the

student." An instructor offered a similar observation, stating, "I have dial-up, so I know it sucks." Such strong reactions must be taken into account when assigning writing and collaboration via an online system like Blackboard. It is possible that the rural nature of much of Central California adds a different dimension to the issue, since even the most financially secure household cannot receive broadband access in some small towns.

Finally, there are issues with locating a stable wireless connection on the CSUF campus. In fact, the English Department and teaching assistant offices do not receive stable wireless signals. Students struggle with the same access issue on campus. A student wrote of her struggles using a laptop, "I have a laptop so I never know when I'm going to get [W]eb service or not. Although when I do, I am very thankful because I can do my online assignments." Do we really want students feeling "thankful" for Internet connections?

#### CSUF Network System Problems

During the weekend of 17 February 2006, Blackboard and the mycsufresno.edu Web sites were offline for maintenance. While the systems are independent, problems with remote access seem to coincide. If I had not experienced difficulties with the system as an instructor, would I have accepted student explanations for late work? I know during

the fall semester of 2004 I was far less believing of student claims that the Blackboard server was either offline or in some way malfunctioning. Nearly a third of students responding for this research, 31.46 percent, indicated they had experienced technical issues with Blackboard. Based on the issues I have had with the system, I wonder if the number might be higher. A number of computer-literate students seem to accept such problems without complaint.

When asking students to use Turnitin via Blackboard, I have had students report problems including missing or damaged electronic copies of papers. Because two of these students had shown me printed copies of final drafts beforehand, there is no question they completed the paper assignments in a timely manner. I also know one of the students to be technically skilled. This does not mean that a highly skilled student might not have made a mistake while uploading a file, but if this is indeed student "error" then the interface of Blackboard and its integration with Turnitin should be examined. I am inclined to believe there are genuine technical issues with Blackboard and Turnitin. The following quote from a technologically proficient student represents the thoughts of many:

I've had people in classes say, "Oh it must be your computer," or "your Internet must be slow."

Well when everything else works perfect and I've never had a problem with other Web sites; it only leads me to one conclusion--Blackboard sucks!

It should be noted that variations of "suck" and "hate" appeared in nearly a dozen transcripts and freewrites offered by both instructors and students. Most of this venom was reserved for technical problems with Blackboard, Turnitin, and the mycsufresno.edu Web sites. Complaints about servers reporting "busy" and very slow screen updates indicate genuine technical problems; such problems tend to indicate an insufficient amount of computing and network resources. Writing and reading online becomes difficult when the system is not responsive.

Another technically astute student identified one of the greatest concerns an English 1 student has:

Blackboard is very easy to understand and work. But if your computer or the program is having technical difficulties that can drastically affect your grade at times. Teachers should be more lenient and prepared for stuff like that to happen.

The question is if we, as composition instructors, are willing to understand that some problems are real--not merely excuses offered by lazy or inattentive students. Indications of genuine frustration have included a deluge of e-mails from students in an English 1 section and

panicked voicemail messages from hard-working students. Such signs of technical problems changed not only my attitude, but also those of several other English 1 teaching assistants.

### Computer Literacy Issues

Even with access to the Internet and World Wide Web, the use of Blackboard does require a basic familiarity with online applications. Those students comfortable with similar interfaces have little difficulty navigating Blackboard, meaning they are free to concentrate on the content of the composition course. However, 10.11 percent of the students in this study indicating they want additional training on the use of Blackboard. While this is not as troubling as the high percentage of students with traditional access issues, it should still concern teaching assistants and other instructors of English 1.

A student familiar with online systems wrote:

This is the first class I have used it in and so far I have liked it. It is easy to use and understand. I am pretty good at the computer so I understand the program very well, but I know it is difficult for some people.

Notice that this student, without prompting from me or his instructor, expresses sympathy for those unfamiliar with online applications. Those students with a desire for

training do indicate that the university, and the composition program in particular, are making an assumption regarding computer literacy. A student wisely observed, "Most people are not as computer literate as the university expects them to be right away, therefore, instruction would be helpful." Other students offered similar comments, indicating that the more a student uses the Internet and computers in general, the easier it is to use Blackboard. Yet, even one of the more technologically skilled students responding to this study offered a common sentiment:

I think Blackboard was a great idea and is really helpful. However the bad thing about it is, that you have to learn how to use it on your own. In fact I still don't know how to use it very well.

How is it possible that a computer-literate student can have difficulty using Blackboard? This question propels me toward the next challenge for instructors: the interface of Blackboard. Do we instructors, as individuals familiar with the system, assume it is easier than it actually is?

#### Usability and Design Issues (Online Navigation)

A significant proportion of students, 17.98 percent, indicated they experienced difficulty navigating the interface of Blackboard. This indicates that once a student has access to the system, he or she might still find it too frustrating to be productive. If students struggle to

locate content or to submit papers for review by peers and the instructor, then composition instruction becomes secondary to an information scavenger hunt. What surprises me is that several instructors interviewed dismissed student complaints about the usability of Blackboard. These instructors insisted that the interface is easy to learn, if students want to succeed. Said one instructor:

It's not that hard to use. They complain, but it really means that they don't want to take the time to learn Blackboard. How hard can it be? These students are just trying to get out of using it.

I do not wish to disparage well-meaning English 1 instructors, but I think these teaching assistants are forgetting how difficult it is to learn new computer applications. What further complicates this problem is the fact many instructors believe customizing the interface improves the Blackboard experience. In fact, 43.75 percent of teaching assistants surveyed indicate they have altered the default menus of Blackboard. The features of Blackboard and specific course content can be more complex to access than it is to enter the system. Not only is the usability of default menus to blame, but instructor attempts to customize the system can further confound students.

Because some of the strongest student reactions were to the Blackboard interface, I think it is important to

reflect on those reactions at length. These comments illustrate what might be one of the greatest barriers posed by Blackboard and other online writing environments. If every course has a different approach to the system, students are never free to concentrate on the academic tasks assigned. How do we balance introducing writing technologies with the need to teach composition and rhetoric to a diverse student population?

### Student Reactions

What intrigues me about student responses is the implication that locating English 1 course content is frequently a matter of "luck" or sheer persistence on the part of Blackboard users. Students reported that instructors would mention online content, but not explain where the content was posted within the Blackboard system. While the location might have seemed obvious to the instructor, it was not obvious to the student. I admit to having placed content within the "Course Documents" area of Blackboard, assuming students would quickly navigate to that particular screen. Only later, when a student told me he had searched "Assignments" for the readings did I realize that I had a responsibility to tell students where materials were posted online.

Students complained that Blackboard was "not user friendly," "confusing," and "extremely difficult." These

comments must be taken seriously, since they reflect a significant dislike of the application interface. Some of the students offer specific complaints, which I will explore at length by following the login process for Blackboard. These complaints often conclude with a call to "make [Blackboard] simplistic" so students can concentrate on the English 1 coursework.

A representative statement is that, "Blackboard could be organized a little better [because] some of the categories are confusing." This quote points to my experience; my student was telling me that the menu choices are why the documents I posted were not located. Not only are menu titles confusing, often the screens are cluttered making things even more complicated. A student suggested that there was, "Too much going on on one page."

When a student suggested I write down all the steps required just to access my English 1 course content, I thought it was a good idea. How difficult could it be to go from anywhere on the Web to my class content? I used Blackboard daily and it seemed reasonably simple. How come my perceptions and those of my fellow teaching assistants did not correspond to student complaints regarding the Blackboard interface?

### Example "Basic" Navigation in Blackboard

Unlike applications installed "locally" on a user's computer system, Web-based applications lack any standard design guidelines. For example, in both Apple and Microsoft guidelines, menus run horizontally across the screen. There is an established order to these menus, which becomes internalized by most users. Most computer users assume the first menu will be "File" and the last will be "Help." Without such standards guiding Web-based applications, also known as "browser-based" software, users attempt to discover the patterns to each Web site.

Simply accessing the Blackboard Learning System can be an awkward process. I consider documenting what should be a simple process an important example of poor interface design to highlight within this paper. Until I interviewed students, I had not realized how automated and naturalized this process was in the case of myself and other teaching assistants. Consider how difficult it is to reach the main menu for an English 1 course on Blackboard. Students and instructors learn two ways to access the system. Blackboard can be accessed directly by entering

`http://blackboard.csufresno.edu`

into the "address bar" of a Web browser, or a user might be accustomed to accessing Blackboard indirectly by first opening

`http://my.csufresno.edu`

as a starting point. If a user is trained to begin at "my.csufresno.edu" (My Fresno State), then he or she must login to the university's PeopleSoft application to proceed to Blackboard. The user clicks a "Login" button located near the top-left of the Web page and is directed to a login screen. At the login screen, the user is prompted to enter a "My Fresno State" username and password. Clicking a button labeled "Login" loads the next application Web page.

It should be noted at this point that the PeopleSoft system seems to suffer from a number of issues. The system is slow and often unstable due to heavy access during the first two weeks of most semesters. Users opting to access Blackboard through the PeopleSoft application often assume, incorrectly, that Blackboard is unavailable. This misconception is reflected in several student interviews. If these users knew they could access the system directly, it might increase Blackboard participation and reduce erroneous reports of problems with Blackboard.

The next screen in the PeopleSoft application, known on campus as My Fresno State, features a default text menu along the left-hand portion of the screen, in addition to a number of horizontally aligned menus in the upper-right corner of the Web page. The "My Menu" table lists the following items:

Applicant Information

PeopleTools

Reports Portfolio  
Personal Portfolio  
Student Portfolio  
Faculty Portfolio  
Open University Blackboard  
Blackboard  
Access Email  
Apply for Admission  
Apply for Admission (Intl)  
Apply for Scholarship  
Financial Aid  
Student Accounting  
Plan Class Schedule  
Request Official Transcripts

Users must recognize the difference between the "Open University Blackboard" link and the "Blackboard" link. Many users attempt to access Blackboard by clicking the first listed link including the word "Blackboard." If one reads the link as a statement, "Open University Blackboard" seems to be a reasonable choice to "open" the Blackboard content for a particular course. This navigational error results from the "Open University" enrollment program being ambiguously named "Open University Blackboard" for courses offered online.

I have had students try to register for Open University, after mistakenly opening this page. I do not

fault the students for this error, nor for the frustrations they experience. The menus are a demonstration of poor usability design.

After a user accesses the proper Blackboard link from My Fresno State, the system requires that he or she login again, this time to Blackboard. Some students have indicated to me that they then assume they have lost or reset their connection to a unified system and restart the entire process several times before realizing this extra login is routine.

The "Login" button of the initial Blackboard screen directs users to a form requiring their Fresno State username and password. After clicking the "Login" button on this form, a Web page with two lines of black text of a dark blue background appear. This Web page is difficult to read on many monitors, depending on the screen settings. The screen reads:

Login successful.

Click here to access the service you requested.

I have learned that users unfamiliar with Web standards are puzzled by the instructions on this screen; they do not realize "Click here" means they should literally click the word "here" to proceed. Again, I consider this a usability issue that can be overcome with better wording of the instructions or the addition of a

graphical button featuring a word or phrase such as "Continue" for clarity.

At this point, the user is presented with the Blackboard Portal. From this Web page, the user can access any course content to which he or she has been granted access. A series of "tabs" across the screen acts as a menu, opening Web pages that then feature additional navigation links. Also, the portal features links to course content on the "My Blackboard" page--if a user knows to scroll the page down to reveal these links.

The "Courses" tab loads a page featuring a "Class List" that links directly to the content areas for particular courses. This page is used by most students and instructors; it is an easy-to-understand list of links, less cluttered by additional content than the "My Blackboard" page that initially loads.

Once a student enters the Blackboard content area for a specific course, a Web page is displayed that features six distinct menus or sets or navigational links. The design features a minimum of five horizontal "tab" buttons, positioned at the top-left of the page. These tabs default to My Blackboard, Courses, Organizations, Blackboard Support, and User Guide. In the upper-right, three small icons with text are links to Home, Help, and Logout. The "Home" link does not return a user to the opening screen of Blackboard, as users might assume, but instead directs the

browser to the Web page for the university at <http://www.csufresno.edu>. At a minimum, one should expect the "Home" destination to be the My Fresno State portal.

Unless an instructor has customized his or her course content on Blackboard, the system displays six buttons vertically along the left edge of the Web page. These buttons are Announcements, Syllabus, Faculty Information, Course Documents, Communication, and Tools. Below these buttons is another navigation section labeled "Tools." These links are used primarily by instructors, though students report selecting them while attempting to learn the system. It is not my intention to critique the entire interface of Blackboard, but the interface itself does affect student and instructor perceptions of the online experience. The fact so many menu choices are displayed can and often does create user confusion.

The larger area of the Web page, also known as the "content frame," changes based on the links selected while a user is within a specific course's content area on Blackboard. The content frame defaults to the "Announcements" page. This page, and most others, has a small "runner" menu above yet another set of tabs. Other menu selections might feature lists of links, more tabs, or complex tables mixing tabs and lists.

The preceding description of Blackboard's interface illustrates how students and instructors experience

Blackboard. If the system seems intuitive to a user, then the individual is better situated to concentrate on issues of composition and rhetoric. If, however, the system becomes a barrier to interactions between students and instructors, the composition course itself is adversely affected. If instructors are trained to utilize Blackboard or learn to use the system over a period of semesters, eventually the navigation is internalized and even naturalized. The number and complexity of menus fades from memory as access to the various functions becomes routine. A first-year composition student is far less likely to be comfortable with Blackboard, even if the student is technically astute and a frequent Web portal user.

#### Social Concerns

One of the more interesting perceptual differences between instructors and students was a result of cultural misunderstandings. Many of our students at CSUF are Hmong. These students are from a highly deferential culture; the instructor is an elder never to be questioned. Also, it is considered highly offensive to comment on the work of another individual. Blackboard is a public forum, where we encourage students to "peer edit" and comment openly on papers submitted. In these cases, a student might overcome all other barriers to using Blackboard, only to come up against a cultural difference. Wrote a Hmong student:

The aspect I mainly don't like is the discussion boards. I am not keen on commenting on others' writing. I don't think that it should be a required tool.

This student explained that being corrected by an instructor should be a private matter. There is an issue of honor and pride, which I do not imagine other English 1 teaching assistants would have anticipated, either. This raises a question regarding the role of a course in the acculturation of students. Should we be "Americanizing" students and teaching them to openly review each other? Are we responsible for teaching students to question authority, even when doing so runs counter to the beliefs of some in our classes?

#### Pedagogical Failings

After exploring issues of access, navigation, and social concerns, one must consider the possibility that the complexities of Blackboard contribute to pedagogical failings. Or, is a lack of critical pedagogies resulting in a failure to utilize Blackboard effectively? I believe that some of the usage patterns adopted by English 1 instructors are indicative of pedagogical failings. Our zeal for technology has resulted in the adoption of the Blackboard Learning System without careful preparation for its place in the curriculum.

A number of scholars have identified diverse reactions of instructors to online technologies. Those who have some experience, whether they are personal or pedagogical, for instance, are more likely to embrace the possibilities of a system like Blackboard. Those instructors with limited online experiences may be reluctant to utilize network technologies as supplements to classroom content. What is less understood are the ways in which instructors who do use online technologies respond to student issues and technical problems as they arise. My own realization that students were struggling with the technology was shared by other English 1 instructors who began to question the usefulness of the Web-based application. I am interested in the changes in perceptions of those instructors and what those shifts in perception might suggest about the ways we educate teachers.

While some instructors viewed technological problems as challenges that needed to be addressed and overcome, a number of the teaching assistants surveyed responded by removing the network technology from the course curriculum. If we think back to the instructor who stopped using Blackboard because of the library closure, this instructor's comments are indicative of the multi-layered ways that we understand access. For this instructor, access is understood as the ability to obtain a laptop computer from the library. Any ideas she might have had about

developing a pedagogical approach that provides other kinds of access--the means of employing Blackboard to develop critical literacy--were preempted for this instructor by a failure of the university to provide access to computers.

However, it is possible that abandoning use of Blackboard is preferable to using the system without aligning the online content with classroom discussions. A frustrated student wrote, "It was like I was taking two courses, one in class and one online. I did not like it." This student was expecting the online and in-class content to correspond--but the instructor had failed to explain any relationship between the two experiences. In such cases, Blackboard lacks purpose. Should we use the system merely because it is important that students learn to compose and edit within collaborative applications? Is the use of a network sufficient reason to use Blackboard? Some teaching assistants seem to accept this philosophy.

#### Procrastination and "Laziness"

Is it possible that Blackboard conveys to students the notion that procrastination, also identified as "laziness," is an acceptable ethic within the university? Does Blackboard allow both students and instructors to be "lazy" during the first-year composition course? If so, this seems to establish a pattern other courses and departments are unlikely to support. Poor study habits are likely to

penalize students during their future courses within the university. Worse, perceptions that instructors are inattentive to their duties damages our collective images as professionals. A concerned student wrote:

The downside is that it makes students and teachers lazy. Students feel as if they don't have to attend class. Teachers slack on grading which doesn't allow students to achieve their academic maximum.

The student indicated that posted essays and reading responses lingered on Blackboard, without any input from the instructor. Only when repeatedly asked to respond would the instructor post a brief comment--usually without any feedback on the mechanics of writing. This troubled the student, who wanted to improve his grammar skills. While grammar is not the focus of English 1, it is reasonable for a student to expect some guidance when he or she seeks it, especially via an online collaboration system.

Numerous students mentioned the concern that Blackboard encouraged "busy work" or "added work" without any particular value. Some students indicated that teachers must feel it is important to assign work on Blackboard, regardless of any lack of value behind the assignment. With instructors neither responding to nor evaluating the student responses to these assignments, it is difficult to dismiss the student perceptions as incorrect.

### What Blackboard Emphasizes

There are pedagogical implications to what any classroom management technique emphasizes. What Blackboard emphasizes are values we might not actually aim to promote; those of us with a desire to democratize education surely do not believe grades and schedules are the most important aspects of education. Unfortunately, students seem to be assuming the primary purpose of Blackboard is to distribute grades and calendars. Even students who dislike Blackboard overall appreciate the posting of grades and schedules, aspects of the university many of us wish we could alter. The irony of an effort to create more freedom resulting in students becoming trapped emotionally by traditional markers of "success" should not escape our consideration.

When an instructor views his or her role as training future employees, maybe such lessons about scheduling and personal responsibility are appropriate. It is not that we should avoid posting syllabi or grades--these are important uses of the system--but should we allow online scheduling to dominate our usage?

Another interesting usage adopted by more than one instructor is the review of Blackboard logs to measure what students read and do while online. I admit to skimming logs to ensure students are using the system and not experiencing problems, but I do not use the logs to monitor students. Is this a valid use of the system? What does

monitoring students online suggest to these students about their future online experiences? One instructor informed me:

I really like Blackboard a lot. We have groups that exchange papers and all that. It works well because I know what they are doing without pestering them all the time. You have to check every night, but it teaches them something about the future. They need to understand this is how jobs will be.

It is true that employers have the right to monitor online activity, but is this something educators should be modeling? Does this practice actually discourage online exploration? What are the implications of this philosophy? I wonder if the result is less critical analysis by students, who become fearful of what the teacher watching might observe?

## Chapter 4

### ADDITIONAL REPORT FINDINGS

While a significant majority of first-year composition instructors utilize Blackboard in some manner, with 62.50 percent of respondents indicating they utilize Blackboard, this number seems low considering the composition program has made efforts to encourage the integration of Blackboard into English 1 courses. Even if the overall usage rate reveals a willingness to use the Blackboard technology, the lower percentages of English 1 instructors using specific Blackboard features reveal potential issues with either Blackboard or instructor knowledge of the system.

#### Minimal Blackboard Usage

Several students interviewed stated a preference for online syllabi and course calendars. Of the English 1 instructors surveyed, only 56.25 percent posted their syllabi to Blackboard. I would expect more of the English 1 instructors to post syllabi, since the default Blackboard menus include a dedicated area for the posting of a syllabus and course calendar. The most puzzling aspect of the lack of online syllabi is that an instructor utilizing Blackboard would not post a syllabus. Though I thought this might be an oversight when completing the survey form,

several instructors indicated to me during interviews that they did use Blackboard but did not post their syllabi to the system. Therefore, what I thought might be an error on the part of a survey respondent might reflect the actuality of Blackboard usage.

It is my personal view that the composition program should require the use of Blackboard as a complement to all English 1 course sections. A reasonable transition step would be a mandatory posting of all syllabi and course calendars to the system. Composition courses are an ideal situation for these documents because we, as composition instructors, try to stress the importance of planning within the writing process. Students should pace drafting and editing cycles, learning to produce first drafts early in the writing process so modifications can be tried and adjusted well before any final deadlines.

Many of us, as first-year composition instructors, set firm deadlines for drafts during some or all paper assignments. In effect, we are telling students that we either assume they will not draft unless told to do or that we want sufficient time to offer assistance to them during the process. One benefit of an online calendar is that we can produce a more detailed schedule than is practical on paper. These details can include "suggested dates" for steps in the writing process. Seeing such suggested dates on-screen might help students establish their own routines.

Another benefit is that an instructor can make changes to a syllabus and course calendar as events require. Seldom does an English 1 course proceed according to the original plans of the instructor.

Imagine being a student in a course with some Blackboard access required. Many students will select the "Syllabus" button only to see an empty content pane in Blackboard. Such a "dead link" on a Web site is generally considered bad form. A Web site should feature menu options and page links that take the site visitor to current content. Web sites with too many dead links are perceived as untrustworthy because the designer has not carefully edited the pages. The detection and removal or correction of dead links is a form of editing. While we teach students the value of accuracy in citations within academic writing, we should apply these lessons to online forms of composition.

Students comfortable with the Internet and World Wide Web have an evolving understanding of what it means to compose nonfiction works for an online readership. One of the values of the Web is the ability to hyperlink from one Web page to another. A hyperlink is not only a citation, but the ability to access the referenced material with a simple mouse click. If a site has numerous dead links, there is an implication that the webmaster does not value the external source sufficiently.

If a student included improper citations in a paper, we might penalize the student. We should remember that any dead links within a course on Blackboard convey a sense that the instructor does not keep the online content up-to-date.

The most important document to maintain online might be the course syllabus. An up-to-date and easily accessible syllabus indicates that the English 1 instructor is a careful editor and values accuracy. As the first document distributed in many course sections, how we present the document to students conveys how we privilege paper over alternative forms of publication.

#### Online Paper Submissions in English 1 Courses

Of the instructors surveyed, 37.50 percent indicated they either accept or require students to submit papers via Blackboard. Two thirds of the instructors expecting online submission of papers, or 25 percent overall, indicated a preference for Turnitin, a service that is now seamlessly integrated into Blackboard.

I believe Turnitin can be a useful teaching tool, but I also wonder what the use of such systems conveys to students. As a user of the system, and a proponent of it, I am admitting that plagiarism, intentional and not, is a major problem at the university level. In fact, this belief is supported by several popular surveys of high school and

college students. The ease with which students can access information via the Web makes accidental and intentional copying of texts a matter of quick mouse clicks or keystrokes. This ease seems to reduce the sense that the use of external intellectual property is in fact a form of theft or plagiarism. Our students have grown accustomed to sharing copyrighted music, photos, and even films via the Internet and Web.

Academics send mixed signals regarding intellectual property. Students confuse the concepts of open source software and intellectual commons with the right to use information without crediting the source. We can use Turnitin to explain this difference. Instead of assuming students are intentionally committing a fraudulent act, I often sit with the student and explain how to properly document the sources of information. Only if a clear majority of a paper is plagiarized do I issue a failing mark.

I encourage the composition program to promote the use of Turnitin, via Blackboard. I expected a much higher percentage of instructors to request papers be submitted electronically via Blackboard, and nearly all the instructors using electronic submission to favor Turnitin.

Those instructors using Blackboard but not accepting papers electronically have a number of valid reasons for not doing so. Several instructors indicated they collect

outlines and drafts alongside final papers. These instructors assemble traditional paper portfolios for grading purposes. Students are rewarded for their revision efforts, not only the final paper.

Because many of our students prepare drafts and make revisions on paper, it is not possible to migrate to an online "e-portfolio" system. Unless the university were to implement a different online system, such as a true content management system with collaboration features, English 1 instructors must recognize that many of our students work on paper before using a word processor to compose papers.

The alternative approach I employ is to require final papers be submitted online, via Turnitin on Blackboard, on the same day I ask students to bring drafts and outlines to class in a folder. This compromise recognizes the limits of Blackboard while embracing the use of Turnitin. I have also learned that collecting drafts, often written in longhand, reduces the use of large blocks of text from Web sites. I cannot explain this pattern, but I use it to my advantage as an instructor.

#### Preference for the Printed Page in Submissions

There are reasons to appreciate the publication and distribution of texts on paper. As composition instructors, we often teach that among the skills of an active reader is the marking of a text. Paper requires no Internet access

and no electricity. But, we are also in a time when the Web page and Portable Document Format (PDF) of Adobe Acrobat are becoming primary formats for distribution and publication. I am ambivalent, therefore, to find that half of the English 1 instructors surveyed post additional readings to Blackboard. Admittedly, this shows a respect for the new media formats, but I wonder if these formats are in fact the best for serious academic reading.

Students have learned that information can be quickly skimmed; when something is no longer interesting an alternative is only a mouse, keyboard, or remote control click away. We need to understand and appreciate that online reading does differ from the reading of printed materials. I worry that students will perceive online documents as somehow less important, yet at the same time I am guilty of a wood pulp bias when I want to read something with care.

While many instructors perceive the value of online readings, I suggest we need to develop reading strategies for these documents. My suggestion lies outside the intent of this paper, but is an issue I seek to address in later research. What does matter is that instructors have recognized a trend and are implementing it within their own Blackboard content. Ideally, students perceive this same trend towards standardized document formats that can be accessed in a variety of ways. An instructor posting

documents as PDF files has made those files accessible to all major computer operating systems, handheld computers, and specialized e-book readers. Intentionally or not, the instructor has indicated that information should be easily shared.

### Shorter Online Assignments

Most English 1 instructors require their students to submit weekly responses to readings. These responses serve diagnostic purposes, as well as working as a means to ensure students complete readings that will be discussed in class. Unlike the submission of papers directly to an instructor, without other students having access to the work product, the posting of responses online is participation in a public forum. Of the instructors surveyed, 37.50 percent use Blackboard in this manner. One instructor surveyed indicated that students were also expected to respond to a minimum number of their classmates. I, too, encourage such responses, but have felt that requiring online interactions did not work well in my courses.

Unless the purpose of having students post their works in a public forum is stated clearly, the perception is that the instructor has engaged in "busy work" according to students interviewed. This marks one of the most divergent perceptions of Blackboard between students and instructors.

While we are attempting to foster peer editing and ongoing academic discourse, the students perceive a pointless increase in course assignments.

#### Responding to Student Papers via Blackboard

Only two instructors surveyed, 12.50 percent of the respondents, returned papers to students via Blackboard. Most of the instructors with whom I discussed grading practices indicated a preference for grading on paper. These instructors, like myself, either ask for papers that have been printed or even print papers submitted via Blackboard. There are several reasons for this, and I intend to conduct further research on grading practices in online courses.

I admit that along with other instructors, I have a perception that students read feedback more closely when it appears in print. This unconfirmed bias leads me to print papers, write my responses, and then return to the computer to record grades online. My students have noticed this and have commented on my apparent discomfort with editing a paper on screen. My students have called me "old-fashioned," which I perceive as an indication they would not object to an electronic mark-up of papers.

Turnitin offers such a markup facility. Instructors could also use most word processors to provide feedback. Microsoft Word, OpenOffice, and WordPerfect each provide a

revision mode that highlights and color-codes corrections. I have had a student submit a draft to me that included the revision marks, indicating how and why he made particular changes to his paper. He asked, reasonably, why I avoided revising and responding to students in the same manner.

With 37.50 percent of instructors familiar with revision tracking tools, it is reasonable to expect more instructors will use these tools to respond to student papers. However, as I discussed earlier, there appears to be some discomfort with responding to students in this manner. Composition instructors recognize the value of revision tools for their own writing process, but do not perceive students as either wanting or valuing feedback on papers returned electronically.

#### Online Forums and Chat

In addition to requiring that weekly reading responses be posted online, many instructors use the "Discussion Forum" feature of Blackboard to extend class discussions beyond the limits of the classroom. It is significant that 43.75 percent of instructors surveyed use these forums. Here we find instructors attempting to encourage debate and discussion using the online format as a way to theoretically remove barriers. I initially thought that the most important barrier I was removing for students was time. As a good class discussion would take hold, the clock

would intervene and abruptly halt the exchange. I also clung to the notion that students less active in class might participate more online.

By creating online forums, we intend to convey an interest in student opinions and attempting to offer a more open exchange of ideas. Students perceive the online forums as either places to continue debates or extra work that does not affect a course grade. Students have plenty of spaces in which they can voluntarily continue debates, including e-mail and blogs. If students are not enthusiastic about online exchanges, voluntary forums will not be utilized. Discussion forums are also perceived differently by students based on the role an instructor assumes. Potential perceptions range from disinterested observer to aggressive moderator. Some instructors might elect to be engaged in the online forums, but the perception remains that the instructor has authority over the participants.

#### Interactive Chat

It was interesting to discover that 18.75 percent of English 1 instructors use the interactive "chat" functionality of Blackboard. Blackboard's chat mode allows instructors to show material in one window, such as a sample paper, while interactively exchanging messages with students. One instructor surveyed has conducted a complete

class meeting online, during the regularly scheduled class. This instructor perceived the online interactions as offering students greater opportunity to contribute to the discussion. Without analyzing a transcript of an online session, it is impossible to determine if there was a more even distribution of participation. In fact, a transcript of a traditional class session would need to be compared to the online session to determine if there were differences in the tone, quality, and equality of the participation.

## Chapter 5

### IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

As a graduate student, I have enjoyed the use of the Blackboard within courses taken at CSUF, especially the online discussion boards. The nature of the Blackboard discussion board is such that one can read previous posts and carefully consider new contributions. In a graduate-level seminar, the ability to carefully consider a response is a rare pleasure. However, the students posting the longest and most passionate contributions to the online discussions were also the most active in the traditional classroom environment. In this respect, it would seem that Blackboard does not challenge the traditional power dynamics of the classroom. The dominant personalities continue to set the discussion agenda, mediated by the instructor.

My personal experiences directly contradict some of the most idealistic hopes for online learning. While there continues to be discussion of the virtual classroom as a democratizing force, the evidence seems to illustrate it is merely another social situation that inherits the same problems as other social environments. Students likely to debate in class, confident of their views, are likely to pursue online discussions with the same zeal. Students

lacking confidence in the classroom seem unlikely to exert more influence online. I theorize this might be the result of our hybrid approach. The students using Blackboard are also meeting in the traditional classroom space. Those actively engaged in one forum are likely to be challenged in the other. If a course is limited to the virtual realm of Blackboard or similar systems, the results might be different.

While I imagined online forums creating a more democratic course, I now admit that this did not happen in any of my English 1 courses. Course sections with low student participation in class had low participation rates in online forums. Conversely, an extremely vocal class was too active on Blackboard for me to keep up with their various discussions. This correlation supports a theory I hope others will consider: an outgoing individual is likely to have a similar online persona. Extroverts are likely to have profiles or Web sites featuring photos of friends and family, according my hypothesis. Likewise, these people will be less inhibited in an online forum.

I admit that an online persona can allow an introvert freedom, but only when that person is anonymous and not likely to encounter fellow participants in person. With Blackboard as a complement to a traditional course, students interact in class. Even anonymous online identities are quickly discovered by classmates. In this

environment, as opposed to a global online exchange, students operate online much as they do in the classroom. Yes, there are some exceptions, but most students either wish to maintain an image or are uncomfortable attracting any attention to their views.

While instructors are perceiving Blackboard forums as venues offering students freedom, students are perceiving an extension of the classroom. Our students are accustomed to navigating the online and material worlds as part of a continuity; discussions started online continue on the phone or in person, while discussions begun in person are often continued online. Young students do not perceive the stark distinctions that previous generations might have imagined.

Additional factors that disrupt any potential democratization are access to and familiarity with online technologies. These factors certainly overlap, but many students with potential access to online technologies nonetheless have little interest in interacting via the Blackboard system. I stress this because many of my students reticent to use the system are technologically astute.

## Chapter 6

### REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCH METHODS AND FUTURE STUDIES

This study leads me to pose a number of questions that deserve attention. I think we must consider how the amount of time spent using an online collaboration system, such as Blackboard, shapes student views of the composition course. Does the amount of Blackboard usage relate to the views of the overall English 1 experience? Do the dynamics of a Blackboard-only course differ from the hybrid models surveyed for this paper? Given a choice, would students prefer more or less content online?

Based on this study, I believe there is deep dissatisfaction with Blackboard among CSUF students. Because these students are primarily first-year undergraduates, will they accept Blackboard more readily with increased usage? If Blackboard itself is responsible for student complaints, should we examine the use of alternative systems within the composition program? Do other systems enable greater collaboration? Cooperation?

Finally, because many students mentioned the lack of instructor feedback, I plan to study how online responses to students differ from responses on printed copies of student papers. How does responding to a paper via

Blackboard compare to responding on a printed copy of a student composition? Is there more or less feedback for the student?

#### Proposed Changes to Methodology

I believe a more in-depth study of Blackboard and its use within the first-year composition program at CSUF is merited. Any future study should be predicated on a desire to better integrate the online experience with classroom instruction. It would be my hope that the survey be a tool to guide future training of instructors and to develop a set of guiding pedagogical principles behind the use of Blackboard.

Once the purpose of the survey is refined, I suggest both an open-ended response and a series of scaled questions be submitted to students. These questions should be developed with someone experienced in survey methodologies to ensure the data collected have external as well as internal validity. I would randomly order the survey questions to decrease any feedback effects, which is a common problem with questionnaires.

There are definite strengths to the open-ended response. Because the interviewer does not prompt the respondent, issues of genuine concern are more likely to be expressed. Also, the interviewer does not interrupt the respondent, which might indicate the expectations of the

interviewer. The risk of expectation bias is reduced, though not eliminated. Written survey responses require more respondent effort, but are probably the best sources for meaningful data.

I believe the key is to follow-up the open-ended responses with a traditional survey. The initial series of follow-up questions should establish the computer skill level of each respondent. Using the self-rated system of my data collection has some validity, but it fails to match the validity of a series of specific questions regarding computer usage.

1. Do you own a personal computer, share one, or use public terminals?
2. How many hours per week do you use a personal computer?
3. Do you consider yourself a casual user, expert user, or serious enthusiast? (Please rank from 1-10, 10 being a serious enthusiast)
4. Do you use Windows, Mac OS X, Linux, or another operating system?
5. Which word processor do you use most?
6. Have you used a spreadsheet?
7. Have you used presentation software?
8. When using a word processor, do you utilize document templates?

By asking specific questions, a survey will generate a much better picture of the computer usage habits of respondents. Also, it is possible to make some assumptions regarding the skill of computer users based on their usage patterns. The first question is one I did not consider during my discussions with students because I mistakenly assumed most university students had easy access to personal computers.

For example, studies have revealed that users of OpenOffice are often more advanced than users of Microsoft Word, while Word users are more advanced than users of Microsoft Works. Because OpenOffice requires a user download and install an "open source" application, the users tend to be well-informed enthusiasts. The question of operating systems is also an interesting indicator of computer skills. Many users do not know the operating system of their computer, nor do they care. These users are in contrast to Linux users, who must maintain their operating system "by hand" and understand a number of arcane commands.

After establishing computer usage patterns, I would expand into the area of Internet usage.

1. Do you access the Internet via campus terminal, dial-up connection, DSL, or cable modem?

2. Do you make regular use of e-mail? If yes, how many messages per day or per week do you receive? How many messages do you send?
3. How many hours per week do you use the World Wide Web?
4. What are your three most frequent destinations on the Web?
5. Do you use an instant messaging service? On a scale of 1-10, how frequent would you rate your usage of IM/chat when online?
6. Have you created a "public profile" on any social network, such as MySpace, Yahoo 360, or another service?
7. Do you participate in any mailing lists (listserv) or online discussion groups, apart from school?
8. Have you created or maintained a Web page using either hand-coded HTML or a specialized editor, such as Dreamweaver or FrontPage?

After establishing computer usage habits, I would then extend the survey into areas of course participation and how online content is perceived. I believe the questions posed would depend on the usage standards proposed within the composition department. I would also survey general

Blackboard usage, gauging how the use within first-year composition complements online content in other courses.

### Instructor Survey

Instructor responses being limited to "Yes/No" answers meant that no explanations for specific answers were provided or recorded in the database for future analysis. "Yes" answers were not elaborated, which I think is a weakness of the format.

Knowing that an instructor posts additional readings online does not explore how often readings are posted, the nature of materials posted, or how students respond to these readings. It would be interesting to study the amount of Blackboard participation expected by an instructor and the corresponding perceptions of Blackboard by students.

I would now ask instructors, in what manner do they respond to papers via Blackboard? It would be interesting to know the level of feedback provided by instructors via the online system versus traditionally collected papers. With only two of the surveyed instructors and none I interviewed in person responding to papers online, I intend to research grading and online paper submission.

I have considered the value of comparing student responses by English 1 course. The reason for establishing such a relational model is to study the influence of instructor attitudes on the student perceptions of

Blackboard. Current data can only present a generalized comparison of Blackboard perceptions between English 1 instructors and their students. However, instructors might object to any relational survey for fear the interview responses would include identifying information. Methods would need to be implemented to prevent the evaluation of instructors based on the survey.

My suggestions for a revised methodology represent what I have learned from this initial process. I believe each additional study of Blackboard usage within composition at CSUF can and will refine survey and interview techniques.

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WORKS CITED

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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

DATA AND TRANSCRIPTS FROM INSTRUCTOR  
SURVEYS AND INTERVIEWS

Survey Results

Table 3

Complete Results of the Instructor Survey

	<b>Instructors Responding "Yes"</b>	<b>Value as a Percentage</b>
Instructor Uses Blackboard as Part of English 1	10	62.50%
Course Syllabus Available via Blackboard	9	56.25%
Student Papers Submitted via Blackboard	6	37.50%
(Papers Submitted to Turnitin, specifically)	4	25.00%
Additional Course Readings Posted on Blackboard	8	50.00%
Students' Responses to Readings Posted on Blackboard	6	37.50%
Blackboard Discussion Forums Used	7	43.75%
Live "Chats" Conducted via Blackboard	3	18.75%
Papers Returned to Students via Blackboard	2	12.50%
Customized Blackboard Appearance and/or Menus	7	43.75%
Uses E-Mail to Correspond with Students	13	81.25%
Blackboard Improves Student-Teacher Relations	9	56.25%
Knows HTML for Web Page Design	2	12.50%
Uses Web Search Engines	15	93.75%
Belongs to a Social Network Site	3	18.75%
Uses Instant Messaging / Chat	2	12.50%
Has a Personal Web Site	5	31.25%
Uses Spell Check and Grammar Check	16	100.00%
Uses Paragraph "Styles" for Formatting	8	50.00%
Uses Document Templates	7	43.75%
Uses Macros and/or Add-in Automation	2	12.50%
Uses Document Analysis Tools	1	6.25%
Uses Revision Tracking Tools	6	37.50%

Survey Methodology

In addition to students, 16 instructors were also asked to reflect on their experiences with Blackboard. To better quantify instructor responses, they received a more traditional survey form. I found this necessary after

written responses proved too short for lexical analysis. I am not certain why the original responses from instructors were brief, or even terse, but the use of a traditional survey was necessary. I appreciate that some instructors might fear being evaluated based on survey data.

There were nine questions on the survey form distributed to instructors.

- 1) I use Blackboard for the following:
  - Syllabus
  - Collecting long-paper assignments
  - Posting additional readings
  - Weekly reading responses
  - Online chats
  - General discussion boards
  - Other

The first question presented a list of uses for Blackboard, allowing instructors to check boxes representing how they use Blackboard to supplement their English 1 courses. Uses surveyed included: an online syllabus, additional readings, online chats, collecting assignments, weekly reading responses, and general discussion boards. Instructors were also provided a line to indicate any other uses of Blackboard within their courses. I omitted a selector for "I do not use Blackboard," but several instructors either added this to the form or

indicated that they did not use Blackboard under the "Other" checkbox.

A database field was created to correspond to each of the checkbox areas on the survey form. For any marked box, a value of "True/Yes" was entered into the database. Affirmative responses were not explored during this survey, so it is not possible to provide quantitative analysis on these matters.

2) I have customized Blackboard's menus.

Because students have suggested the Blackboard menus can be confusing, I wanted to know if instructors had responded by customizing the menus. An affirmative response was recorded as a "True/Yes" in the database. No information was collected regarding the types or quantities of modifications to the default menus provided by Blackboard.

3) I respond to student papers via Blackboard.

I entered a "True/Yes" value into the database for each instructor indicating that Blackboard was used to respond to student papers. No data were collected to examine the types of responses provided via the system, so a response could be anything from a simple grade issued online to a complete mark-up of a paper. The survey data can only reflect that some feedback is provided via Blackboard.

- 4) I believe Blackboard improves the teacher-student relationship in a course.

I placed the core question regarding Blackboard in the middle of this survey. Do instructors perceive Blackboard as improving the student-teacher relationship within the composition classroom? A value of "True/Yes" was entered into the database for each instructor marking the corresponding checkbox. The survey results only measure if there is a perception that Blackboard improves relationships, not by how much or what way relationships are affected.

- 5) Outside of Blackboard, I respond to student writings via e-mail.

The survey allowed instructors to indicate if they contacted students regarding writing assignments via e-mail outside the Blackboard environment. A value of "True/Yes" was entered into the database for each instructor using an alternative e-mail system to respond to students. I consider this question an interesting indicator of an instructors willingness to interact with students via the Internet.

- 6) I consider myself:
- Able to hand-code HTML, write macros, and learn any software
  - A serious Internet user
  - A very-skilled computer user

- A casual Internet user
- A moderately skilled user
- A novice Internet user
- A novice computer user

To quantify the technical skills of instructors, the survey featured one broad statement, which indicated expertise in both Internet usage and general computer usage, and two sets of checkboxes to self-evaluate Internet and general computing skills. The database featured two data fields, one for Internet skills and one for general computer skills. If an instructor checked the overall expert box, both data fields were assigned a value of 4. Novice skills were assigned a value of 1, casual/moderate skills were assigned a value of 2, and serious/very-skilled self-assessments were assigned a value of 3.

7) I use the following Web/Internet technologies:

- Google / other search tools
- Social networks (MySpace, Friendster)
- Instant Messaging or chat
- I have a Web site

In an effort to quantify Web usage habits among instructors, the survey asked if instructors used various Internet applications. Instructors were asked if they used a search engine, instant messaging, social networks, or maintained a personal Web site. Use of these four

technologies was mapped to four database fields, with "True/Yes" values entered for affirmative check marks.

No attempt was made to quantify the time any instructor spent with a given technology. My goal was to establish how familiar instructors were with leading technologies, especially those technologies embraced by their students.

8) I use the following features of my word processor:

- Spell check / grammar check
- Paragraph styles (Normal, Heading, etc.)
- Document templates
- Macros and add-ins
- Document analysis
- Revision editing tools (track changes)

In an effort to establish the relevance of a proposal for future study, the instructor survey included a question listing specific word processor usage habits and skills. If we are going to expect that students utilize the potential of their word processors, then composition instructors should understand the capabilities of the tool. The six features listed in the question were: spelling and grammar checking, document templates, document analysis, paragraph styles, macros, and revision tools. For each feature use indicated via a checkbox a value of "True/Yes" was entered into the survey database.

This question does not establish the extent to which an instructor uses a particular feature, nor can it measure the skills of individual instructors. The goal of this question is to establish if instructors are moving beyond basic word processing.

- 9) Do you have any additional comments about Blackboard? Favorite features? Biggest complaint?

A final question allowed for an open-ended evaluation of Blackboard. Instructors were asked to list any favorite features or their biggest complaints regarding the system. Answers to this question were entered into the survey database as close to their original text as possible. The answers were not evaluated statistically, but were saved for citation within this report and to explore future research possibilities.

Instructor Comments

The following comments appear verbatim, as either written on the survey form or spoken during an interview. Each response is separated by an extra blank line.

I don't like to have papers submitted on Blackboard. It's easier to read them on paper, anyway, you know? We do lots of drafts, so why use Turnitin?

Blackboard helps bring more students into the conversation. We don't use forums nearly enough.

It's a pain when you have more than one class.

Chats work really well for me. We discuss it in class before we use it, so they understand the rules and what I expect. You have to let them know you are there, so they don't get out of hand, though. If they get off topic, I ask a question and guide them back on track. I think it brings out things the classroom doesn't.

Posting readings online saves me a lot of time and effort. Let them print the articles or read them online. I don't have to trust the copier is working.

It's not that hard to use. They complain, but it really means that they don't want to take the time to learn Blackboard. How hard can it be? These students are just trying to get out of using it.

Since the library closed, it's a lot harder for some students to access the system. I don't use Blackboard as much as in the past after realizing how hard it is for students who don't have their own computers.

The university makes it clear you need a computer. If they can afford video games and the latest clothes, it's a matter of priorities.

I used it for a little while, but it got old. It was taking more time to use Blackboard than I think students got out of it. They weren't responding to each other, so it was just them writing to me. Why bother with that?

I really like Blackboard a lot. We have groups that exchange papers and all that. It works well because I know what they are doing without pestering them all the time. You have to check every night, but it teaches them something about the future. They need to understand this is how jobs will be.

If I don't like it as a student, I'm sure not going to use it as a TA. I have dial-up, so I know it sucks.

Students can get involved in a thread if they want. It isn't up to me to force them to interact online. I can call on someone in class, but how do you do that with Blackboard and not seem insulting?

I love it. I use the Digital Dropbox for everything I can. I'm not sure I trust Turnitin.

APPENDIX B

DATA AND TRANSCRIPTS FROM STUDENT  
RESPONSES AND INTERVIEWS

### Survey Results

Table 4

Complete Results of the Student Survey, as Generated by  
Lexical Analysis

	<b>Students Indicating "Yes"</b>	<b>Value as a Percentage</b>
Access Issues Connecting to Blackboard	24	26.97%
Experienced Technical Issues	28	31.46%
Found Menus Confusing	20	22.47%
Considered Navigation "Slow" (Tedious)	16	17.98%
Desires Blackboard Training in Class	9	10.11%
Uses Blackboard in Other Courses	41	46.07%
Uses Chat/Instant Messaging	13	14.61%
Maintains a Personal Web Site	2	2.25%
Has a Profile on a Social Network	13	14.61%

Table 5

The "Tone" of Responses as Calculated by Lexical Analysis

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Average Score (1-5) 3.280898876

Count of 5:     19     21.35%

Count of 1:     14     15.73%

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### Survey Methodology

The student responses were studied carefully and mapped via lexical analysis to a prepared form. Most written responses offered specific information aligned with at least half of the lexical mappings. When a response did not address an area of interest, I recorded the answer as either "null" (no information provided) or "NA" (not answered). An "NA" response mentions an area of interest,

but without providing a clear answer to the question being tested.

The data collection forms from both students and instructors were used to populate a FileMaker 8.0 database. The tables in the database were designed to generate reports in Microsoft Excel, which was then used to calculate statistical data for this report.

Response Tone. Each student paper was assigned a response tone value, ranging from 1 to 5, with a score of 5 representing a complete positive review of Blackboard. As with all lexical analyses, the overall response tone scoring is partially subjective. Also, the results do rely on the student response length and detail; longer responses provides more facts and opinions from which to draw a response tone.

Response tone scores were entered into the database and a mean response tone score was calculated. I also counted the number of extreme scores, 1s and 5s, to determine if the mean was reflective of a genuine distribution curve.

Access Issues. If a student survey mentioned any difficulties accessing the Blackboard system, a "True/Yes" was marked in the database in the category of access issues. The complexity of access issues was not established; only the fact a student mentioned having

access issues was recorded. Statistically, I was then able to calculate the percentage of students affirming difficulties with access.

Access Issues Described. Student responses varied from generic claims of difficulty accessing Blackboard to specific examples of problems with the system itself or access to the system. When possible, a description of any access issue was entered into the database for reference. There as no attempt to statistically analyze open-ended responses, though a larger study might enable such analysis.

Computer Skills. Student computer skills were ranked based on any definitive evidence in the responses. In most cases, it was not possible to rank the skills of individual students. While not the focus of this study, it does reveal an oversight in the research design. I address this concern later, as it represents one of the limitations of my chosen methods.

Internet Skills. To determine the Internet usage skills of students, several keywords and phrases were noted. I looked for specific evidence of Internet usage, which included everything from online chatting to the creation of a personal Web space.

Chat. If students indicated a use of chat or instant messaging software, a "True/Yes" value was indicated in the database. No measure of chatting frequency was attempted in this survey; my concern was the number and percentage of students engaged in chatting. Based on discussions with my own students, it seems most young students are familiar with and frequent users of online chat applications. The inclusion of chat software on many new cell phones has complicated the role of chat. I did explain to some students that "chat" is online chats, or instant messaging, and could include cell phone applications. Both instant messaging and "text messaging" share condensed language patterns, which I have explored in an earlier conference paper.

Social Sites. The explosive growth of "social networks" during the last two years is difficult to ignore. Companies such as News Corp. have entered the area by purchasing existing services. In the case of News Corp., the company purchased controlling interest in MySpace.com, the fastest growing social network among teens and college students. Already, MySpace.com has a record label and Fox Television has announced plans for a MySpace themed television network.

MySpace.com, Friendster, Yahoo 360, and other services require that an individual either be invited to the service

or join during a rare open invitation period. The goal of these sites is to appear limited to the most popular individuals. In essence, demand is created by appearing to be an elite membership.

The use of social networks was recorded in the database as a "True/Yes" entry. Many of the students did not indicate a passion for MySpace or other social networks. The lack of any indication that a student does or does not use MySpace is not conclusive evidence that the student does not use social networks.

Personal Web Site. If students indicating operating a personal Web site, a "True/Yes" value was entered into the database. Again, the lack of any reference to a personal Web site does not indicate definitively that a student does not operate a Web site. However, discussions with students did lead me to believe this number would be relatively low.

Blackboard Technical Issues. I attempted to separate technical issues with Blackboard from issues of access. If a student reported a technical issue, a value of "True/Yes" was entered into the database. Examples of technical issues include: Blackboard servers being offline for maintenance, the "loss" of student postings, and the damage of uploaded files. It is difficult to confirm technical issues, which can be a combination of user error and software conflicts.

Blackboard Training Wanted. Some students indicated they would appreciate more training on the use of Blackboard. If a student indicated a desire for training, a value of "True/Yes" was entered into the database. Because each instructor uses Blackboard in a different manner, it is unclear if the students seeking training were interested in generalized training or if they were seeking assistance from particular instructors.

Other Courses Use Blackboard. It was important to gauge Blackboard usage throughout the university experience of first-year composition students. Their experiences in other courses influence their expectations of Blackboard, both positive and negative. If a student indicated that other courses in which he or she was enrolled used Blackboard, a value of "True/Yes" was entered into the database.

Many of the responses explained how Blackboard was used in other courses, in particular to what extent instructors were engaged with students online. I did not attempt to quantify Blackboard usage in other courses; my interest was the English 1 experience.

Confusing Menus. Because I am interested in the effective design of online collaboration systems, I recorded any instances of complaints that the onscreen menus for Blackboard are confusing. If a student indicated

difficulties understanding the menus, a value of "True/Yes" was entered into the database. The most common examples of confusing menus involved the "Communications" submenu in Blackboard, which has a long list of destinations.

Slow Navigation. Many students expressed frustrations with the responsiveness of Blackboard. Once a menu is selected, the system can take time to move to the next screen. If a student complained about these delays, a value of "True/Yes" was entered into the database. I did not evaluate the extent of particular complaints; certainly some users will be more tolerant of delays than others.

Comments. Comments submitted by the student respondents were entered into the survey database. Most students did offer detailed accounts of their experiences. I believe these anecdotes offer suggestions for further study.

#### Student Comments

The following comments appear verbatim, either as written during a freewrite response or spoken during a follow-up discussion with a group of students. Comments are separated by an extra blank line.

What I hate about Blackboard is because it's online. If you don't have access to the Internet you can't do your work.

Blackboard help you figure out what's your grade in a class. It also gives you what assignment is needed to be done.

It was a little confusing at first. I sometimes go to the things I need to check by pure luck.

It's nice to have the syllabus and the course schedule online in case mine gets misplaced.

I hate computers. I wasn't able to submit an essay cause it wasn't working correctly.

Teachers do not keep up with it so you do not know when to check it.

I think it can be a little confusing. Too much going on on one page. Couldn't figure out where to find what I needed for my classes (ex. going into communications or discussion board).

It has had negative effect. Why? because sometimes I miss an assignment cause I couldn't check it. I'd rather be told what I have to do in class or in the syllabus.

Inconvenience. Not always able to access the network.

You just have to know your way around things to actually understand how to use Blackboard. Make it simplistic.

I believe it would be highly beneficial for the University to not develop more technological 'turn-it-in' type situations, but do more writing. It helps improve grammar errors and such. Down with Blackboard! It's too impersonal!

I think Blackboard is great. This and my wire making class are the only two classes that use it. It makes communication out of class much easier. It caters to the procrastinator and allows me to turn in papers and work at my own convenience. Blackboard could be organized a little better some of the categories are confusing. The organization is my only complaint, otherwise it is great.

Blackboard has been very helpful. When you miss a class or you just want to see what you have for homework, Blackboard is there to tell you what you need to do. At first, I did not like it because it took time to go on it. Now, I love it because it is very helpful and useful.

I do think that teachers need to explain how to use it a bit better. It is also a good way to save paper! I really like that. At times I have experienced technical difficulties so it is not always reliable or consistent.

The only thing I don't like is that you have to log in a couple of times to get to it. Once is enough. If the professors are willing to take time to use it, it will be very beneficial.

To tell you the truth, I really don't like Blackboard... It takes a lot more time to see what you have to do. I would like it better if the teacher would just give us the work instead of going into the Internet.

This is the first class I have used it in and so far I have liked it. It is easy to use and understand. I am pretty good at the computer so I understand the program very well, but I know it is difficult for some people.

This is the first semester I have used it so it has been a bumpy start.

The downside is that it makes students and teachers lazy. Students feel as if they don't have to attend class. Teachers slack on grading which doesn't allow students to achieve their academic maximum.

I am not a big fan of Blackboard... It is... hard to get what you need off of it.

Sometimes it has problems but in general I think it is a good idea and worth any problems it has.

When I have classes that are on Blackboard, it frustrates me because I find it harder to understand what is going on. Sometimes Blackboard can make you mad because it isn't always working.

I like using Blackboard because I like to type and it makes it easy to view the syllabus and assignments. It is interesting to see what everyone writes about and to get a different view... I really like taking quizzes online because I can be comfortable while taking it... I wish all teachers would use Blackboard because then I could do all my tests and homework online.

It was awful. I could not find enough time to go to class and get on the Internet... I ended up not getting online enough, I missed assignments, things were passing me by and I didn't even know it. I was never shown how to use it so I often didn't understand how to turn everything in. It was like I was taking two courses, one in class and one online. I did not like it.

This is my first time ever using Blackboard and I find it very easy to use. It saves me a lot of time. Rather than writing down my responses I am able to type it on Blackboard and send it to my instructor right away. I type faster than I write, so it saves me a lot of time in general.

I am not a big fan of Blackboard which most people who know me would be surprised. I generally have every new tech gadget, I feel lost without my Blackberry. I feel like Blackboard is just a continuation of work. I also think that it is changing the way we do homework and I think it is just giving us more 'busy work.' The aspect I mainly don't like is the discussion boards. I am not keen on commenting on others' writing. I don't think that it should be a required tool.

I don't really like Blackboard because it is just another thing we have to check. I feel it to be just another thing the teacher adds to our assignments. For me it's already hard enough to check my e-mail. Now I have to check Blackboard, too.

I dislike Blackboard because I don't have my own personal computer. If I did, I would like it a lot more. Having a lot of online homework when your Internet is slow is

painful for the student. If you put yourself in the position of the student with the bad Internet connection, we can see that sometimes Blackboard can be a real headache.

Sometimes Blackboard can be extremely difficult. I know that I have had a few cases in which I had problems logging in and problems finding things that teachers had posted.

I don't personally like it. I don't see the point of doing so much on the Internet then e-mailing it to the teacher. I would much rather do it in class.

I don't like that it takes forever to find stuff. Once I find it I can't download it.

I think Blackboard can be extremely useful as far as getting materials and announcements. But it has made it too easy for instructors to give us more work. Blackboard is often just an extra thing for worry about.

Using Blackboard is kind of hard for me. I think Blackboard is good but I do not really have interest in using a computer all the time. If I have a choice I'd rather take homework on paper.

I think Blackboard is a very helpful tool for college students. However, the Internet is sometimes a pain in the neck. You can't get a connection sometimes, the servers are too busy. It might just be me, but I have the worst luck with the Internet. I have a laptop so I never know when I'm going to get web service or not. Although when I do, I am very thankful because I can do my online assignments.

Blackboard, although relatively helpful, has it's ups and down. It's good in an aspect of ease in certain instances. There is little or no question when it comes to online assignment completion. However, sometimes Blackboard tends to have an error when I am about to post my response. When it comes to navigation, it definitely needs an overhaul. I don't like how some buttons appear or disappear on their own sometimes.

I really like to use it because I am able to look at the upcoming assignments and get papers off of it. I like the fact that I can turn in assignments online and see what other students write. I am able to get other points of view that I may not have grasped before.

I hate Blackboard! I do not have the time needed to sit down and type a report, take a math quiz or respond to a topic. I have two jobs and work a total of 60-80 hours a

week with my combined jobs. I do not want to sit in front of a computer when I get home. If I have to hand something in on paper I can take my work with me to work and do it on a break or lunch. I am unable to hook up my laptop start it and type during my breaks. This is why I hate Blackboard and think we should no longer use it or use it sparingly.

I did at sometimes get confused with Blackboard because of where things were placed and where we turn in our assignments.

I think that Blackboard was stupid only because I didn't have a computer, but I have to say for most students who don't have a computer it's hard to look up the assignment you have to do, which can really cost you some points. I know you have unlimited resources especially in the library. But do you know how hard it is to get a laptop or computer around campus?

Blackboard is a good educational tool. However, I don't like having such an integrated class, it makes it very difficult. You almost need to check your computer 20 times a day to make sure there is nothing you have missed before or after your English class.

Blackboard is very easy to understand and work. But if your computer or the program is having technical

difficulties that can drastically affect your grade at times. Teachers should be more lenient and prepared for stuff like that to happen.

Blackboard in general is very helpful. With the daily announcements, responses and easy access to contact the teachers it enables the students to get help easier. Blackboard could be more user friendly in ways to access courses and grades.

It's very helpful to have course documents from class. If one loves their paper, they can print it out online. I also like how there's a form to e-mail the teacher.

I would suggest that each class that decides to create a link on Blackboard should go over how to use it in class. As a freshman, turning assignments in online was a shock from handing them in. Most people are not as computer literate as the university expects them to be right away, therefore, instruction would be helpful. Overall, it is helpful now and easy once you get the hang of it.

We rely on Blackboard too much. Blackboard is a okay program along with web work and turn it in but I feel it's better to hand write and turn in things the old fashioned way.

Blackboard in my opinion is a great source that helps us students be in constant contact with how well or bad we are doing in our classes regularly. I am one who is always on Blackboard whether it be to check my grades or to do an assignment or to check my work. I have found more advantages to this than disadvantages. Quite honestly, it is really easy to understand and it saves a couple of minutes of my time of having to go to my teachers' office to ask what my grade is. I don't really understand why so many people say its difficult, although I have never had to take a class online, I found it to be very simple to figure out.

I think Blackboard was a great idea and is really helpful. However the bad thing about it is, that you have to learn how to use it on your own. In fact I still don't know how to use it very well.

I feel Blackboard is not user friendly. A person who uses computers all the time it may be easy to understand. People without exposure to computers Blackboard can be very complicated to use.

It would have been nice to have a workshop available to teach a student how to use Blackboard.

Blackboard is also helpful for online tests and homework assignments as well. However, Blackboard also has a lot of flaws. Sometimes it does not work or you cannot get into parts of Blackboard, which is needed to do an assignment.

I've had people in classes say, "Oh it must be your computer," or " your Internet must be slow." Well when everything else works perfect and I've never had a problem with other Web sites; it only leads me to one conclusion - Blackboard sucks!

If teachers weren't so lazy, they'd handout all the materials that are on Blackboard.

Blackboard is not a reliable source. By this I mean that the campus system seems to always have problem. I would say that 50% of the time I can not access my CSU Fresno, which in turn blocks my access to Blackboard. Also, never have I been taught how to use it. Many teachers have insisted that we use it but never have I actually been walked through the process. Next it is not user friendly, it does not have a simple layout and what I know about it I learned by playing around with it.

My experience with Blackboard has not been a bad one. Sure it has its bugs and glitches but what doesn't.

The Website rarely functions like it should. The site is slow and a lot of the links don't even work plus, the fact that every single teacher uses Blackboard differently makes it really indifferent. Some teachers post grades some don't. Some of them will even post grades and then not mention it in class or through an online announcement and I really hate it when a teacher will post an assignment on Blackboard that they never talked about during class. It's really just a way for the school to save money on paper. But really all it does is pass that burden on to the students.

The only problems I have come across with my experience are the technical issues with it. My computer has a virus protection installed which prevented access. I was confused when I first used Blackboard, and the loading process is very slow and sometimes freezes if toggling from different web pages. Overall I believe Blackboard should be used if the technical issues were solved and a better instruction for the tool was utilized.