Scenario

As an entering freshman, Lucas meets with Dr. Addison, a much-sought-after mentor among students who want to write professionally. He tells her that that he hopes to write fiction, and she suggests that in such a competitive field he will need a body of work that shows he is serious about his writing. "A good first step is to look at the college's WordPress blogging platform," she explains. "It offers several sites for students and faculty members to showcase their writing. Look for places to target your work, and create a writing plan for this year." She also points to a journaling course in which students blog on a WordPress site three times a week and the class discusses each student's work.

Browsing the campus WordPress sites that evening, Lucas imagines writing op-ed pieces for the campus news site or book reviews on the library pages. He also has story ideas for two student-run fiction journals. Because the college has deployed the BuddyPress plugin, which powers a campus social network, Lucas locates a campus discussion forum for fiction writers and joins a fiction critique group.

Meeting with Dr. Addison the following week, Lucas shows her a WordPress portfolio he's created. For now, only the two of them can view it because it shows what he intends to do this year, including securing an op-ed humor column, writing book reviews, and submitting short fiction to the student-run journals. Dr. Addison approves his approach, observing that it will be easy at year's end to convert this plan to a portfolio of completed stories and articles.

Three and a half years later, Lucas has been accepted into a prestigious MFA creative writing program. The entrance committee liked his WordPress portfolio, commenting favorably on his weekly humor blog about a parrot he doesn't really own and his series of articles about a campus community outreach program for children with hearing disabilities. In his interview, the committee had focused on his fiction: his short stories, a novella, and a recently completed novel. Most of this work was originally published on campus WordPress sites, but based on comments from readers, Lucas had moved several short stories and his novella to a commercial e-publishing site. These comprise a fantasy series with a growing fan base that gives him a steady, modest income, which Lucas hopes to use to help finance his MFA.

1 What is it?

WordPress is an open-source web application that is fundamentally a tool for publishing content, such as community sites, campus publications, and online portfolios. Though most often used as a blogging platform, it is flexible enough to be considered a web development platform. As such, it boasts a substantial library of useful plugins and a community of users in excess of 50 million. On college and university campuses, WordPress may support portfolios, news sites, departmental newsletters, alumni magazines, and a variety of spaces where students and faculty members can publish and share curricular work on the web. It has emerged as the most popular tool of its type because it does not require much technical skill. This ease of use has, in turn, changed publication into a viable learning tool across the higher education landscape.

2 How does it work?

For campus-wide use, IT staff can install a local instance of WordPress with the multisite feature enabled. This central installation behind the firewall makes individual WordPress accounts available to the entire campus community, allowing users to enter content viewable either privately or on the web at large. In some cases where institutions have not undertaken an installation, individual instructors have set up their own WordPress instances, but this approach does not offer the authentication and security safeguards provided by the campus network. While the application is most often used for blogs, there has been growing interest in WordPress as an alternative for some features of the learning management system (LMS). For this purpose it is often deployed with the BuddyPress plugin, which can turn any group—such as a college campus—into a dedicated social network replete with a friend system and discussion forums.

3 Who's doing it?

A broad array of colleges and universities have made use of the multisite capabilities of WordPress locally and encouraged its use among faculty members, staff, and students. The University of Mary Washington, which established itself as an early exemplar of blogs for teaching and learning, currently offers an extensive WordPress site featuring dedicated blogging communities in areas such as history, economics, freshman seminars, campus news, and study abroad. UBC Blogs at the University of British Columbia are powered by WordPress with the BuddyPress plugin. This allows the UBC campus community to function as a social network in which users can form specialized groups and set up discussion forums for classes, projects, teams, or social organizations. City University of New York (CUNY) encompasses 23 individual colleges that

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together make up the base of a social web called the CUNY Academic Commons. Rather than function primarily as a blogging platform, this ambitious project seeks to foster a social space for students, teachers, courses, and open-source projects in the WordPress/BuddyPress environment. At one of those 23 colleges, Macaulay Honors College at CUNY, a separate WordPress installation powers an e-portfolio gateway, a tool students can use to begin building their academic and professional online personas.

4 Why is it significant?

WordPress offers a stable, flexible, and highly configurable platform that provides a one-stop shop as a web development tool and a publishing forum for students and faculty. Its popularity on campus has been driven in part by a movement replacing traditional writing assignments (for which the instructor is the intended audience) with writing intended for a broader readership, such as a class, a study group, or the web at large. Students who can participate in such learning experiences will find themselves more comfortable writing for the web and maintaining an online identity once they graduate.

Those institutions that add BuddyPress to their WordPress installations reap the benefits of a combined social networking and blogging platform that allows students to become involved in the work of their peers, comment within the social environment, and operate collaboratively to improve everyone's performance. For those experimenting with LMS alternatives, a BuddyPress-dependent plugin called ScholarPress provides LMS features like a class dashboard, courseware, calendars, assignment-handling, and a grade book.

5 What are the downsides?

The limitations presented by WordPress generally depend on whether it is being used as a blog platform, a web development tool, or a supplement to an existing LMS. Where WordPress is installed locally as a blog site or development tool, a suitable investment in IT is required to ensure it is connected to authentication and that safeguards are in place for those portions that are not to be made public. If the college or university does not support a local WordPress installation, the tool might not be connected to the LMS at all. Those hoping to deploy WordPress as an LMS option may find that significant resources are required to integrate with services such as their library or registrar, which many instructors count on to support assigned readings, research, and grade reporting. Also, some students object to the use of WordPress instead of the institutional LMS because they need to learn a new application that is not used in their other courses.

6 Where is it going?

Blogs for students and faculty have established a foundation for web publication and interaction. The result has been a trend in academe toward writing that is increasingly open, conversational, and collaborative, a trend reflected in the emergence of WordPress add-ons. Digress.it, for example, invites readers to make in-depth conversational comments by making it possible to enter paragraph-style margin notes on blogs, essays, or articles. This kind of thoughtful feedback makes it valuable for writers to put their ideas before an audience, testing chapters as blog posts before folding them into a longer work. Those blog posts may subsequently be gathered by a tool like Anthologize, which offers authors a chance to edit, reorder, and update their efforts before converting the entire collection to a file viewable by e-book readers.

Mobile, on-the-spot access to blogs is likely to become more popular via WordPress add-ons like P2, which enables microblogging for those wishing to join the conversation with a quick update or comment. Authors presenting their work on mobile devices are becoming sensitive to the way their content looks on a mobile platform, and emerging tools allow them to address this issue. The Onswipe plugin, for example, lets bloggers present their text in a magazine-style format for those using an iPad or iPhone. Similar products are expected to emerge for other mobile platforms.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

The importance of WordPress as a publishing platform is reflected in its extensive user base. In higher education, **it offers students the chance to write reflectively for various audiences, giving them practice in having their voices heard and their views considered by a wide variety of individuals**. At the same time, students can explore the benefits of rapid prototyping, putting their ideas before an audience, getting reactions, and modifying their work accordingly. Because many college installations allow students to open their work to the public at large, some students involved in blogging for a class have gathered fans of their work beyond the campus community, and a few have been offered jobs on the strength of those presentations. That may be the most lasting value of tools like WordPress—that they provide a springboard for students to launch their ideas and their written reflections into the wider community.

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