WRA 210 is an introduction to web design course, so I have this semester chosen to use a semi-customized WordPress CMS that I used with my online composition class in the fall to enable students to see more web content and to organize some of the dynamic parts of the course in interesting ways. From our course hub at [http://www.phillalexander.com](http://www.phillalexander.com) students can instantly review PowerPoint presentations from class, can check my current course related Tweets (I also have them tweet as part of class—at the end of each meeting), and can access my own blog and their fellow classmates’ blogs through the blog roll.
The elegance of this CMS is that 90% of course content is right there in easy-to-access digital form (and this is, of course, particularly meaningful in a class about course design). All of the readings other than those from the book they purchased from the class are accessible via hyperlink from the schedule page, as are all their assignments, all my contact information, and any other materials we might use in or submit during a class period.

II. Learning and Interaction Goals of the Blended Course
(what learning and interaction outcomes did you hope to achieve in your use of technology, why is this an award-worthy course)

Sadly I removed my fall course from the web (I switched hosting providers), but it was an even more compelling example (because it was a full semester and included message boards in addition to all the things on my 210 site) of what the move to providing course content this way allows. The first thing is that while just reading the site doesn’t give the same rich experience as class, all of the key materials are there, 24/7, for students to review. They have access to my PowerPoints before we start, to any notes I take, etc. More importantly, the use of Twitter and the student Tumblr blogs extends class discussions into virtual space. The students embrace this (they tend to be a little hesitant at first then go all-in), and it adds a layer of richness that face-to-face discussion cannot by offering students more time to communicate and more semiotic channels (they can link and upload pretty much anything they wish).

More importantly in this particular course, though, all of the “doing” of things online (blogging, tweeting, accessing files through a webpage design, having an online interactive syllabus document) greatly enhances my ability to teach web authoring because it isn’t as if we are looking at the web then talking about it; we’re working on the web as we learn to create pieces of the web. It’s far more hands-on, and I think it leads to the students walking away with a much richer understanding of the subject matter. It’s one thing to talk about how CSS functions. It’s quite another to talk about it on a page where you’re also tinkering with the CSS.

III. Points of Interest and Innovation
(Please discuss course highlights and including URLs and/or screen shots of key components of the course you want to bring to the attention of the judges. Possible outstanding aspects of the course might include student interaction, rich media content elements, interactive learning objects, assessment, effective incorporation of polling and surveys, facilitated teamwork, peer review, portfolio creation, etc.)

I fear I’m repeating myself a bit (so I apologize), but I think the real innovation is in the way that a CMS designed like this (as opposed to—no offense to the university—something like ANGEL) allows for great student involvement and exposure to digital writing and authoring technology. If you look for example at some of the student blogs (in the blogroll section at http://www.phillalexander.com/210) you can see that many students have begun the process of doing involved customized responses to their work. This sort of frame also creates a true sense of class extending beyond the meeting time. The material is always there, and content is potentially always changing/evolving/inviting. The way the course is structured also encourages collaboration, and the students feel much more comfortable communicating online due to the integrated web nature of the class.
IV. Accessibility

(It is not a requirement that winning entries be accessible to learners with visual, auditory, mobility, and cognitive disabilities. However, if your course content is accessible, or if it incorporates an innovative approach to accessibility, please describe.)

My WordPress conforms to our university usability standards. The only real innovation here, though, is that the site works on mobile phones/ipads as well. Only one student in this course has used that functionality, but my fall students loved that they could quickly access assignments and announcements using their phones.

V. Evidence of Effectiveness with Students

(Please include evidence such as comparative test scores, SIRs results, short student letters of support, your own observations of project or group performance, etc.)

My fall students loved this new approach. I wish I had quantifiable data to back it up, but many of them heaped praise on the access to information and the fact that they could always retrieve all of our course materials.

As for the 210 incarnation, here’s a student comment from Allmsu.com:

“Phill was a second or third year PhD student when I took Intro to Web Authoring with him... and I adored the class, and his method of teaching. He's pretty geeky and talks a little too quietly, but you can tell that he's passionate about his work as well as yours. He encouraged the class not to be nervous about coding, and worked at our pace - not too slow, but not jumping headfirst into design. He was always available after class, in his office, or on AIM/email in order to answer questions. I learned a lot from him - hope he teaches more classes in the department over the next couple of years so I can have him again!”

And some Twitter comments from students so far this semester:

“Online class forces concrete engagement with the assigned readings, more writing intensive & time consuming. No complaints here”

“Class involves more critical thinking when it's only you, the readings and a laptop. Actually writing out ideas helps them to grow.”

I guess the best evidence I have that the class work is having an impact is that a number of students have come back to talk to me, or emailed me, or told me they went back to the site for something once that part of class (or even the whole class) was over.

VI. Plans for Sustainability

The CMS and the tools I use are easy to replicate and take up very few resources. WordPress is free. The templates I used and tweaked are free. All the web apps (Twitter, Tumblr, Slideshare, etc.) that I use are free and have been, to this point, well supported. I am hoping to present on
this hybridized CMS at the Computers & Writing conference this spring. My proposal was a workshop—with a fellow instructor here at MSU—to teach others to adopt and adapt this CMS for their own courses as an alternative to ANGEL or Blackboard.

At this point the only sustainability issue that this system could face is if one of the web apps I utilize were to go under. Otherwise it is highly mobile, highly customizable, and should be easy to maintain.