October 2001

# Why You Should Use a Course Web Page

E. Joan Blum
*Boston College Law School*, blum@bc.edu

### Recommended Citation

# WHY YOU SHOULD USE A COURSE WEB PAGE

BY JOAN BLUM

*Joan Blum is Associate Professor of Legal Reasoning, Research & Writing at Boston College Law School in Newton, Mass.*

**Brutal Choices in Curricular Design ...** *is a regular feature of* Perspectives*, designed to explore the difficult curricular decisions that teachers of legal research and writing courses are often forced to make in light of the realities of limited budgets, time, personnel, and other resources. Readers are invited to comment on the opinions expressed in this column and to suggest other "brutal choices" that should be considered in future issues. Please submit material to* Helene Shapo, Northwestern University School of Law, 357 East Chicago Avenue, Chicago, IL 60611, phone: (312) 503-8454, fax: (312) 503-2035.

By now, several years into the Internet Age, many of us who are the least bit technologically savvy or technologically curious use a Web page in connection with our legal research and writing (LRW) courses. Most legal writing professionals in this group find that a course Web page is essential to making the course function well and therefore cannot imagine how they ever did without it. If you are one of these people, this article is not for you. This article is for those among us (a sizable minority if not the majority) who don't use a Web page because a) they don't need it, b) their students wouldn't use it, c) they don't want to invest the time learning how to set up and maintain it, or d) all of the above. I address each of these objections in turn.

**A. You need a course Web page.**

How can I presume to tell you what you need? I don't know the intricacies of your course or the specific teaching methods you use. But what I do know is that any LRW course has numerous handouts and assignments. Having a course Web page will make your life much less hectic by helping you maintain your focus on what is really important in the course—teaching your students—and not allowing yourself to be consumed by housekeeping details. I also know that we often struggle to create interesting problems for our students and that the multimedia

hosting capability of a Web page opens up lots of possibilities for creativity in problem development.

A course Web page can be an essential information center for your course, provided that you require your students to visit it daily. If you put every handout or assignment on the Web page, you can free yourself forever from having to keep extra copies of handouts or assignments. When a student asks, just say, "It's on the Web page." You will also save yourself (and the environment) from unnecessary photocopying. For example, you might want to offer your students a supplementary sample memo. Some students might benefit from reviewing the sample; others might not. Putting the sample on the Web page allows those who want it to gain access to it more conveniently than if it were on reserve in the library, and doesn't leave you with a pile of extras.

The course Web page is also a good vehicle for providing answer keys for self-graded research assignments and other materials that students do not necessarily need to print. (Many of us who use course Web pages take the view that we shouldn't use the Web page to shift the responsibility and cost of printing required class materials to the student. Thus, I hand out in class anything that I think everyone in the class should have in hard copy.) The course Web page is a good bulletin board for materials that students need to be able to refer to but don't necessarily need in hard copy, for example, a schedule of oral arguments or class presentations or a list of opposing counsel.

Finally, the course Web page allows you to post announcements between classes without overloading your school's e-mail server and to provide answers to common questions that students ask in person or via e-mail. (I've found this a particularly important use of the Web page in the week or so before a major assignment is due.) Judicious posting of answers to frequently asked questions contributes to students' sense of security about information flow in the course because they are assured that all important information is distributed to everyone, not just to a small group.

While I think just about everyone who has a course Web page benefits from using it to streamline housekeeping, some of us find that the multimedia hosting capabilities of a Web page provide the additional benefit of allowing us to

> " A course Web page can be an essential information center for your course, provided that you require your students to visit it daily. "

> "Just like the baseball field in the movie *Field of Dreams*, if you build it, they will come."

develop novel problems for our students. Having a Web page allowed me last spring to use a problem I could not have used without it. The problem involved a claim by MasterCard International that Pemberton Bar Review (PBR), a fictional company, had infringed MasterCard's copyright in one of its "Priceless" commercials. PBR argued that its use of MasterCard's commercial was a fair use and not an infringement because PBR's commercial was a parody of the original. Whether a work is a parody depends on whether its parodic nature can be reasonably perceived, not on the intent of the author of the second work. *See Acuff-Rose Music Co. v. Campbell*, 510 U.S. 569, 582 (1994). As this question has an important factual dimension, the students needed to view the two commercials several times in order to be able to argue either side. While the students could view the original MasterCard commercial at AdCritic.com, the PBR commercial was a video that we produced at the law school for purposes of this assignment, and digitized and posted on the course Web page. Without the Web page, I would have had to put copies of the video on reserve in the library and students would have had to take turns borrowing them. With 45 students in the class, that would have been a recipe for anxiety and confusion. Knowing that, I would not have used this problem, which with the Web page turned out to be an excellent teaching tool.

You can also use a Web page to point your students to other relevant material that is available on the Web. For example, for my "Priceless" problem, students representing MasterCard were able to get factual data about their client from the MasterCard International home page. These were rich facts that I did not have to take the time to develop. (I did have to develop corresponding facts about PBR, the defendant, which I put on the course Web page.) In previous years, I used my Web page to point students to relevant nonlegal secondary sources that were not available in our library.

### B. The students will use your Web page.

Just like the baseball field in the movie *Field of Dreams*, if you build it, they will come. Today's law students are computer-literate and have access to computers (in the law school computer center if not at home). Although you may find an occasional first-year law student who does not have the technological competence to plug a URL into a browser, the student will need to attain that minimal level of competence at some point during the first year of law school in order to use computer-assisted research tools. So long as your law school provides Internet access for students who don't have it at home, you are justified in requiring your students to check the course Web page daily and are therefore justified in using it as an information center for your course.

Even though technical barriers to access are minimal, students still need to be motivated to go to your Web page regularly. You can announce that checking the Web page is a requirement of the course, but students will not go there unless they feel that there is something on the Web page that they can't get elsewhere. The way to motivate students to go there is to use it for important course materials and announcements. Resist the impulse to send global e-mail messages to give really important notices that you want to be sure everyone gets. If students think that there is a significant possibility that they will miss something important if they neglect to check the Web page, they will be sure to check it regularly.

### C. You don't have to spend a lot of time setting up and maintaining a course Web page (unless, of course, you want to).

While some people enjoy learning how to set up a Web page from scratch, I have never felt the urge to do so. I'm interested in the utility a Web page brings to me, not in the experience of developing one. Thus, I have been content to use prepackaged Web courseware products. From my perspective, using courseware for a course Web page is like using a bread machine to bake homemade bread: you don't have the same *experience* you'd have starting from scratch and doing every step yourself, but you get a *result* that is the functional equivalent.

Over the three years I've had a course Web page I have used two products—for two years Web Course in a Box, and this past year WebCT, which is now the preferred Web courseware for Boston College. Web courseware like these products is designed for people who are not technology

experts; most novice users find courseware easy to use because it has convenient preset features, including categories for announcements, handouts, and links to other resources. Courseware also gives the user easy-to-follow protocols for uploading documents to the Web page. Most courseware will convert small pieces of plain text to HTML (Hypertext Markup Language), and thus allow the user to avoid one step in the process of putting material on the Web page, at least in the case of very short documents. If you want to put a longer document on your Web page, you can use a conversion program (I use Front Page Editor) to convert a word-processing document to HTML, or you can use tools within your courseware package to link non-HTML and non-text materials to your Web page. I used one of these tools (and about four mouse-clicks) to upload my "Priceless" video to my WebCT site.

**D. Don't be daunted—help is on the way!**

Even if each objection can be overcome, you may feel that no matter what benefits it offers, launching a course Web page is not high enough up on your list of things to do. You may feel that you simply do not have the time to do it, even with the help of prepackaged courseware. You may think that the potential benefits do not outweigh the costs in terms of time. To this objection, I say get some help getting started. Even a half-hour spent with a member of your law school's technical staff may be sufficient to get you up and running with courseware. Use the technical staff or the ample support that courseware vendors provide to help you the first few times you try to upload documents. Putting documents up on your Web page will become second nature sooner than you think.

* * *

Sooner or later all of us (except the total Luddite holdouts) will be using Web pages in connection with our LRW courses. Using a Web page will enhance your teaching not only because it will free you from some housekeeping chores, but also because it will open up possibilities for more creative course content. With today's easy-to-use courseware and ample technical support, just about everyone can launch a course Web page

with minimal effort, so I urge everyone to take the plunge. I'd be interested to hear about what you do with your Web page—please contact me at **blum@bc.edu**.

© 2001 Joan Blum

> "Putting documents up on your Web page will become second nature sooner than you think."