

Keeping Control by Keeping It Central

Life used to be so much simpler for me as a computer science professor. Twenty years ago, before the Internet was a tool for non-techies, I could use my personal computer as I saw fit; I taught my courses using the software I thought was most appropriate; and I created my own, and my students' learning environments. The last twenty years have seen many changes, however. Most notable among these has been the emergence of a ubiquitously networked society, an expectation of complete software interactivity, and a plethora of platforms on which everything is expected to run. The growth of the Internet and the World Wide Web deserve most of the credit (or blame) for this phenomenon.

Nowadays, I am regularly confronted by the need to communicate with students or colleagues via Facebook or LinkedIn. My administration wants me to use Blackboard in my classes. My daughter wants to reach me via Instant Messenger. Hardly a month goes by where I am not "offered" another chance to "put myself out there". Moreover, despite my profession, I am not one of those people who enjoy technology for technology's sake. I like technology when it makes my life easier, not when it compels me to enter lots of data and continually update my e-presence.

Ten years ago, it was easy to manage my online identity. I had a simple web page that included simple contact information, a picture of me (so my students could recognize me) and a few links, including one for each course I taught. It was easy to maintain and the user interface was simple. Nowadays, it seems as if every new technology wants me to recreate my e-presence from scratch. I have neither the time nor the inclination to do so. For the last decade, my approach to these technologies is to jump in and refer everything back to my (still simple) web page.

For example, students at my university are used to having their instructors use Blackboard, a course management system. One of the many claimed advantages of Blackboard is that it provides a single point of entry where students can find all of their courses. This advantage is clear, but I find arguments for some of the other "advantages" to be less convincing; most importantly, I do not believe that using Blackboard saves me time. Still, there is some pressure on me to use this system. My solution is simple: I create a Blackboard page for each course that refers the student right back to my web site. (I take a similar approach with FaceBook and with LinkedIn.) I keep it simple by *keeping it central*.

I use this approach with materials that I prepare for others as well. When distributing software or classroom materials, I store them on my personal website and instead place references on other sites that send users back to my repository. In this manner, I control the integrity of the materials and the schedule on which they are updated. Furthermore, I can be sure that users that are getting the "real thing", not similar materials produced by others, but perhaps still using my name. There is another bonus to this as well. If I change any of the information, I need make only a change at my personal website without having to modify data on every site that refers to the materials!

When confronted with new technology, I am most concerned with how the technology will either make my professional life easier or with how it will enhance my teaching. My experience has usually been that even as I enter new networks and systems, the best approach is keep control by keeping my data

central. An easily controlled, personal website allows me to manage my online “identity” more simply and keeps me aware of the image I am projecting onto the Internet. In the early 90’s, this solution made sense to me; as the Internet grows more complex, such an approach becomes a necessity.

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