Should you use WordPress?

WordPress is a publishing platform that provides flexibility for your course materials, facilitates open teaching practice, and serves as a public platform for student work. The flexibility of WordPress is one of its strengths, but it also means that the learning curve may feel steep for those using it for the first time. The breadth of features it brings to the table can be a challenge to wrap one's head around. If you've thought about using WordPress, but are not sure it is right for your class, consider the questions below.

Do you need an online space that is more flexible than Blackboard for course materials?

If you have tried organizing your course materials only to discover that you need flexibility to customize course navigation or page layouts to a greater degree than is possible in Blackboard, WordPress may fit your needs. There are many customizable themes available to jump start the look and feel of your course website. Themes provide a cohesive look to your overall site and give you control of the visual organization of information at the page level. Customization can be great, but be aware that each theme functions differently, so there is an investment of time required to configure each theme to your particular needs. The difference among themes also means that there will be a similar investment of time required if you decide to change your theme in the future. If you decide to customize a WordPress theme, select one that is responsive to desktop and mobile displays and that receives frequent updates from its developer so it serves you well for a number of semesters.

Do you want to teach in the open?

WordPress is a great choice if you are interested in making your course materials available to a broader audience as open education resources. The same flexible features and customizable themes mentioned above help you organize course materials effectively for others to use. WordPress also doesn't require a password, which makes resources easy to access. The site will be discoverable by anyone and will

appear in search results. There are examples of open courses here at UAF that are built on WordPress if you are curious to see what others have done.

Do you want students to share what they are learning in a public space?

WordPress provides ways for students to present and share work with each other using rich media that combines text, images, audio, and video. Using these tools, students can present ideas, learn from each other's understanding, and share in a space that opens to an audience that is beyond the classroom. By default, a WordPress site is visible to anyone on the web.

Take care to communicate to students that they are sharing in a space where everyone is able to see their work. Advise them to change their public identity if they do not want their real name associated with their work. Another consideration if you have students publishing on WordPress is how you will provide instructions for using the site. Can you use resources that are already available or will you need to create your own? Finally, how you will handle work that students post to the site after the semester has ended? Can it live on the site for subsequent classes or will it need to be removed?

WordPress is often talked about as a popular platform for delivering courses because it offers many highly-customizable features in one place. Despite the features, it isn't the right solution for all courses. The benefits to using it effectively in your course should outweigh the investment of time required for you to learn WordPress, customize your site, and support students using that site. If you are new to WordPress and curious about using it for your course, ask someone who has been using it to share their experience. Most importantly, if you think you are ready to give it a try, allow yourself time to learn how to build and manage WordPress.

FURTHER READING

Prep your WordPress site for next semester
Creating mobile-friendly content
Five plugins to make your WordPress course site rock
Student Publication