

## Using Web-based Content Management Systems to Implement Classroom Ethics Discussion: Pitching and Catching at UVa

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Instructors are making increasing use of interactive Web-based communication technologies such as mailing lists and discussion forums, but – as many would agree – merely introducing the tool does not guarantee that the classroom experience will be enhanced. At the University of Virginia, Prof. Jahan Ramazani developed an e-mail based discussion technique called *pitching and catching*. In brief, the class is divided into three groups. Several days before a key reading is discussed, Group 1 writes a 500 to 750 word essay focusing on selected issues raised by the reading. The essay is called a *pitch*. The next evening, Groups 2 and 3 write short (150-200 word) responses to these essays, called *catches*. On the day the class meets, the instructor reads the pitches and catches. As Ramazani observes, this assignment enables the instructor to learn, in great detail, how the class responded to the readings, which points were clearly grasped, and which issues need further discussion.

This paper discusses three years of experience porting Professor Ramazani's pitch-and-catch system to Web-based discussion forum software, which addresses the major criticism students raised concerning the e-mail based approach: Too much unwanted e-mail. In addition, new techniques have been developed to facilitate fruitful discussion of engineering ethics-related issues. Discussed are positive results, including better instructor appreciation of the diversity of student viewpoints, increased participation by introverted students who are reluctant to participate in class discussions, and more thorough exploration of the many dimensions of complex engineering ethics issues. Also discussed are potential problems, including accessibility, security, and reliability issues. The paper concludes by suggesting several easy-to-use, open source packages that instructors can use to implement pitch and catch discussion systems.