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I Hear the Train A Comin' — Course Management System (CMS)

Column Editor: **Greg Tananbaum** <gtananbaum@gmail.com>

This month's column focuses on the world of course management systems. This past spring, **Blackboard** acquired **WebCT** to form a 1200 pound gorilla in the space. The combined company provides educational technology solutions used by more than 3,600 academic institutions, potentially serving more than twenty-five million learners and educators worldwide. Traditionally, the **Course Management System (CMS)** realm has been separate and distinct from the scholarly communication channel carved out by university libraries. **CMS** has been the purview of individual departments, campus IT, or, increasingly, the CIO's office. As the distinct content streams for learning, research, and teaching begin to blur in the minds of faculty, so, too, is **Blackboard's** separation from the world of the library. I sat down virtually with **Isabella Hinds**, **Blackboard's** Senior Business Development Director, to discuss the rapidly spinning world of course management systems.

How has the role of course management software changed over the past few years?

Decisions about course management systems are now made at the institution or enterprise level, not the department or faculty level. Those decisions now involve a broad group of stakeholders on campus: senior administrators, faculty, librarians, as well as academic technology and IT.

The course management system is becoming the framework for academic technology, integrating a range of learning and administrative applications. Over a quarter of our customers have integrated their course management system with the **Student Information System (SIS)**. These integrations are an example of the productivity gains that institutions can realize: at the start of the term, enrollment data from the **Student Information System** can be pushed down into the **CMS** and at the end of the semester, grades and other course data can be sent back to the **SIS**.

We see a lot of interest as well in integrating the library system with the **Course Management System**, but it's been hard for these projects to attract the funding required for a deep integration. That said, **CMS's** contain a variety of tools that allow library staffs to undertake a number of useful projects linking library resources directly into the virtual classroom. For example, e-reserve lists can be imbedded in the course or student assignments for research projects can link directly to appropriate resources. As in other areas of academia, these projects are also adding new dimensions to professional relationships, enabling creative librarians to have a much more active role in the teaching and learning process. Librarians can not only advise instructors on relevant resources, they can actually add those resources directly to the course environment. Librarians, of course, often use the **CMS** themselves to de-

liver courses on how to use the library, follow acceptable research protocols, or qualify sources.

How do you see that role continuing to evolve?

Leading edge faculty will continue to demand new capabilities and new tools as part of the **Course Management System** — and that will in turn create new products and services, particularly those that support and demonstrate improved student outcomes. For example, **e-Portfolios** are opening new opportunities for personalized learning and for looking at total student success and student outcomes beyond the paradigm of the course. Although there are a range of **e-Portfolio** products, at their core all of these products allow students to create a personal repository or portfolio of projects, including video and audio, resources that proved particularly valuable, instructor comments. Students can use these repositories to guide their own learning. They can also control who has access to the information and can opt to share with graduate programs or future employers.

One perception of course management software adoption is that it is wide (many schools) but not deep (small percentage of faculty members at each school) is that accurate, and, if so, how can adoption rates improve?

We are seeing a growing number of institutions with very deep faculty deployment: the **Georgia Board of Regents** will have well over 80,000 student users this fall; **Dallas Community College** district will have over 100,000 student users this fall. These institutions believe that e-learning is central to their mission and have leveraged the learning system to initiate educational transformation. The presence of a widely deployed **CMS** on a campus or in a system creates significant gains in faculty productivity and the measurability of student success.

As these leading edge institutions report their successes in student outcomes, student retention, and faculty productivity, others will adapt approaches to drive faculty use. Students will continue to be key drivers of e-learning: recent studies suggest that up to 70% of students report a positive experience with the **Course Management System**. Their most common concern was that faculty do not use the **Course Management System** enough.

We will also see in the next three to five years a major turnover in faculty. Some institutions are expecting turnover as high as 60%. Incoming instructors will simply assume that there will be a **Course Management System** in place since many of them will have done both undergraduate and graduate work in an era when such systems were standard fare on campus.

Adoption rates will also increase as a result of **Blackboard's** partnerships. Higher Education publishers are making significant strides in the quality of their digital offerings, including

specific learning applications that address unique needs within a discipline. **Pearson's MyMathLab**, **Wiley's WileyPLUS**, **Thomson's Thomson NOW** attract instructors on the basis of the unique needs of the disciplines in which they teach. All of these products are now integrated into the **Blackboard Learning Systems** as either **Building Blocks** for the **Academic System** or **PowerLinks** for the former **WebCT** products. Through those integrations, the instructor can use the most uniquely suited application for their discipline AND benefit from the enterprise productivity in a campus wide **Course Management System**.

Beyond simply posting syllabi and assignments, what are some of the innovative things professors can do with your system?

Some of the greatest strengths of e-learning are in collaboration and communication. Discussion boards on which students, guided by their instructors, can engage in fascinating, asynchronous communication around class topics, research projects, etc. The discussion board is very popular as are the areas which support collaborative student projects, regardless of geography or time frame.

Other popular areas involve practice tests and self assessment — particularly in quantitative disciplines. These tools truly allow students to proceed at their own pace and until they have truly mastered the material.

Interested readers should look on our Website (www.blackboard.com and www.webct.com) for the **Greenhouse Project** and the **Exemplary Course Project**. Both recognize extraordinary achievements by faculty at all types of institutions in all types of discipline. Fascinating.

What is the Blackboard Beyond Initiative?

The **Blackboard Beyond Initiative** calls for the creation of a series of Web properties that connect the institutions, faculty, and students who use **Blackboard** worldwide across education segments and disciplines. For example, social networking is all the rage among students today. Can the same forces that have driven the success of **del.icio.us** drive transformation in education? For those who don't know **del.icio.us**, it's worth a visit. The taglines are Keep, Share, Discover, all great concepts for student learning. The **Blackboard Beyond** sites will be shaped and run by **Blackboard's** client community of practice and developed by **Blackboard**. Though plans are still taking shape, we are very excited about exploring some of how the **Web 2.0** can create **e-Learning 2.0**, learning that relies on collaborative activities unconstrained by time, geography, or institutional boundaries. In this way, e-learning is beginning to support and enhance the concept of communities of practice that became so important to research and scholarly communities in the early days of the Web.

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5. We can offer little or no service from 10 PM to 8AM (High percent of school work is done long after we close our doors and we are embracing 24/7 in the information commons context.)
6. MARC cataloging is worth the cost (Only if it is the cost of copy cataloging)
7. Readers need to have smart people select materials for them (my own studies have shown that e-books selected by users always out circulate expert-selected e-books and Google seems to satisfy most people within the first two screens most of the time.)
8. Satisfying most users is recognized as good enough (Begrudgingly accepted, but this is why huge libraries are revered so much and why Google is appreciated so easily.)

9. Silence is golden in a library (Doesn't seem important to most undergraduates most of the time.)
10. Food and libraries don't mix (My librarians still feel this way but students clearly don't.)

I could go on and on, but you get the idea. And of course we are not the only ones on our campuses reflecting on all of this.

Now I realize that lots of librarians have been going down this doom and gloom trail for a long time. In my own case I still continue to take solace and encouragement from the failure of the long expected paperless office; the continued growth of publishing and bookstores; the ongoing complaints and demands for longer library hours; the number one complaint at my campus that we lack books in the reader's field even though we buy tens and tens of thousands of them annually; the emails from students expressing thanks for the help they received last Tuesday night at 8:00 from the lady with white hair; the high number of students filling our 24/7 Student Study Centre; the pleasure of key-word searching

across human generated LC subject headings and cataloging notes; continued demand for browsing in collections selected by experts; continued high ratings from students who don't mind unmercifully flaying all the other bureaucratic agencies on campus; the complaints from students when it gets too noisy or when people talk on their mobiles (cell phones); and — well I have to admit I don't hear a hue and cry from users to get rid of the food.

So, in our life of constant change there continues to be continuities as well. Let me end with a quote taken from a T-shirt I bought this summer at the **Vancouver Public Library**: "I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library." **Jorge Luis Borges**. Let's hope he is right. 🐘

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How do you see Blackboard services intersecting with institutional repositories and peer reviewed journals?

Clearly there are intriguing opportunities — although progress has been slow. There is intriguing cross over. Institutional repositories and learning object repositories share many of the same issues: metadata tagging systems that will scale, encouraging consistent deposits and updates, archiving.

On the other hand, we, the e-learning community and the scholarly community, speak different languages. At **Blackboard** we are deeply interested in research and scholarship but, day in and day out, we and our customers are focused on teaching and learning. We know that the scholars and librarians building institutional repositories are deeply committed to students. On the other hand, day in and day out they tend to put a stronger focus on research.

When these two communities converge, something totally transformative will occur in education. I think that's what **Cliff Lynch** of **CNI** is trying to point to in his recent writings and presentations.

How will the merger of Blackboard and WebCT change the way in which the academy uses Course Management Software?

The most exciting opportunity initially is for schools that form natural communities to continue and extend their collaboration, even though some may have been using the **Blackboard CMS** and others **WebCT**.

The merger also allows us as a company to bring together more of the best minds in e-learning to drive our understanding and our vision of where our products and services need to go next. 🐘

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automobile manufacturers that you've never heard of?

That, most likely. In the early automobile business, success called for more than vision. After all, 485 companies had some measure of that. It also took access to capital, to labor, to markets, to raw materials. And, it took the very smartest people. And some luck, and some ruthlessness, and not just vision, but a vision-ary to lead the company.

Abbot-Downing was more than a hapless stagecoach-maker that stood still while the world changed. They were a big success. The company sold its goods around the country and the world. **Abbot-Downing** had enough vision to stay in business for over one hundred years. How many companies of any era have lasted as long as that?

What's the lesson in this? One is that parables leave out much of the story. Life is usually more complex. Another is that operating a successful business is not easy. You need vision, but you need more than that. Run a company for a hundred years, and still, you don't have it made. (As today, even the **Ford Motor Company** is discovering.) And a third is that if you do make the right choices, you can prosper for a long time. As **Abbot-Downing** proved.

Print books, to most of us in the business, do not seem quite ready to succumb to eBooks the way the stagecoach did to motorized transportation. The two will co-exist for a long time, as stagecoaches and railroads did. There, in fact, might be a better parallel for today's book vendor. Railroads and railroad passengers needed **Abbot-Downing's** stagecoaches. Publishers of

PHYSIOLOGY

The APS
JOURNAL LEGACY
CONTENT—OVER 100
YEARS of Historical
Scientific Research
—SAVES you 200
LINEAR FEET of
SHELF SPACE

14 Research Journals of the
**American
Physiological
Society**
www.the-aps.org

eBooks and all libraries who buy eBooks will need book vendors to help them complete the trip, since collection development will for as far out as I can see consist of buying both eBooks and print books. For a library, when will it make sense to buy one format versus the other? When to buy both? How to integrate two potential workflows into one? How to find patterns in this dual-buying activity? For a publisher, how to preserve and not cannibalize present-day profits? How to reach all potential buyers of eBooks? How to sell them most efficiently?

And for the book vendor, who stands squarely in the middle of all this today, how to build a solution as elegant and as perfect as the **Concord Coach** was for most of a century? 🐘