WebCT Course Management System

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Purpose

This report discusses the use of the internet-based course management system WebCT at the University of Central Florida. WebCT is utilized in a variety of courses at UCF in varying levels of integration with face-to-face and distance learning coursework, ranging from full hosting of online classes to a minimal use as a syllabus information board or for optional discussion postings.

The example used in this paper is from an undergraduate online course at UCF, CJE3001 Careers in Criminal Justice. The screen shots illustrating the features of the system are provided courtesy of UCF student Caitlyn Piehuta, used with her permission. Where necessary, images may have been edited for the student’s privacy.

The scope of this report includes a definition of course management systems, an overview of the features of WebCT, comments regarding the specific use of the system in the course CJE3001, images depicting the primary screens a student would view when using the system, user tips and comments for successful application, and information regarding the availability of the technology for purchase. The report concludes with a summary of findings and a web directory for sites used in the research.
Definition and Features

The phrase Course Management System is defined by Wikipedia as “a software system designed to support teaching and learning in an educational setting”. A course management system may also be referred to as a learning management system or virtual learning environment.

The WebCT course management system has been used by the University of Central Florida since the summer of 1998 to support learning in and out of the classroom environment. The Internet-based delivery of WebCT allows the system to be utilized by any computer with an Internet connection, regardless of operating system platform. WebCT is quite similar to the Blackboard system utilized by Florida State University.

UCF offers faculty support for training and implementation of WebCT courseware, through the office of Course Development & Web Services. Students receive assistance for WebCT training and problems via the university helpdesk online, or through the use of the WebCT student manual available for download from the UCF Learning Online web page.

There are two versions of WebCT in use currently at UCF, though it is the published intent of the university to transition all courses to the new version in the near future. The legacy version is now referred to as “the old WebCT”, while the newer version is called “Webcourses@ucf” or “the new WebCT”. The two versions are considered part of the larger assortment of online resources for distance students, including the eCommunity contact system and technical support tools for access to the campus networking and email systems, all of which are available via links on the UCF Learning Online web page.

Function

WebCT provides an integrated, secure, web-based platform for delivery of course materials, peer-to-peer and peer/instructor communications, assessment, and organization of educational activities. When a student initially logs in to WebCT, they view a Welcome page showing the courses in which they are enrolled. The link to a specific course redirects the student to a Home Page, where the instructor posts
general information such as the course name and number, instructor contact information, and links to supporting documents such as the syllabus and schedule of assignments.

From the course homepage, a student can navigate through the course site using a Course Tools Menu Bar along the left margin of the screen. The instructor can customize their course page to include only the tools they wish in the Menu Bar. Some of the common tools include Announcements, Assessments, Assignments, Discussions, Learning Modules, and My Grades. Other optional tools may be added at the instructor’s discretion, such as Chat, Calendar, or Mail.

The Announcements tool provides a forum for the instructor to keep students informed about general course information or updates to the activities. The WebCT welcome page also provides a warning section to alert students if there are new announcements for any of their courses.

By selecting the Learning Modules tool, students access the course materials for a particular segment of the class. Modules generally represent one or two weeks of instruction, delivered within a specified timeframe. There may be several sub-sections with a module, such as text for reading, quiz links, and assignment criteria narratives. The introductory text within a module may include links to other course tools within the WebCT pages.

A common tool for peer and instructor communication is the asynchronous Discussion feature. Students create messages using an HTML editor in the Discussion module, and may attach files to their postings. When a student logs in to the WebCT welcome page, there is an information box showing if other students from their courses are logged in at the same time. If other students are online, they may use the Chat feature (if enabled by instructor) to conduct synchronous interaction.

The Assignment tool allows students to submit files such as essays electronically using a digital drop-box. The Assessment tool provides quizzes or exams, generally in multiple choice or short answer format. Within both modules, the instructor controls settings governing the number of exam attempts allowed, time limits, and whether a submission can be modified once submitted by the student.
To provide feedback for students, the My Grades tool may be utilized. This page lists information in spreadsheet fashion, with an assignment title, points earned versus points possible, and an optional commentary field used to explain why a student may not have earned full points for a particular task.

An interesting ancillary tool is the My Progress page. This provides statistical information for the student’s activity within the online course environment. It tracks the number of logins for the course, actual time spent online, number of postings for discussions, and other summary data regarding participation from a technical standpoint. This provides an objective measure of the time spent, though that would not necessarily correlate to the quality of a student’s participation in the course.

Within the CJE3001 course, the instructor utilized the synchronous Chat tool to host “virtual office hours” with students. The chat mechanism was structured to allow private one-on-one chat sessions when students requested guidance, or when the instructor wished to counsel a student about an area of concern based on their assignment submissions. The Chat tool also offered open forums, where students could post publicly for anyone online at that time to participate. This feature was utilized for a group project, allowing team members to pick a time and log on to their private group chat simultaneously for a project discussion.
Demonstration

The following images and captions illustrate the common features and the general progression through a WebCT course site from a student perspective.
Module entry page

Objectives:
Upon completion of this module you will
- Know how to write a thank you letter after the job interview
- Be familiar with ways of responding to a job offer
- Be aware of the promotion process
- Know how to best handle the rejection

Assignment Submission page

Quiz review page
### My Grades page

**Section:** D8Fall_2009  
**Section Instructor:** Makrednovsky Dzyna

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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mid: Quiz</td>
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<td>(out of 5.0)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mid: Crossword</td>
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<td>(out of 4.0)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(out of 5.0)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(out of 5.0)</td>
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### My Progress page

**Webcourses@UCF**

**CJE3001 - 08Fall_0**

**Your location:** My Progress

**My Progress**

- Student:Maleha Catlyn  
- First access: Aug 25, 2008  
- Last access: Dec 1, 2008  
- Total number of sessions: 76  
- Report generated: Dec 1, 2008

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<th>Total Time</th>
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<th>Discussions</th>
<th>Assessments</th>
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</table>

### Assessment page

**Your location:** Assessments

**Assessments**

- View All Submissions  
- View Statistics

**Mid: Orientation Quiz**  
- Start: August 24, 2008 8:00 PM  
- End: Unlimited

**Mid: Crossword**  
- Start: August 24, 2008 8:00 PM  
- End: September 7, 2008 11:39 PM
**User Tips and Application**

As a course management system, WebCT is designed with the intent to help instructors create usable virtual classroom environments for delivery of a wide range of materials. This is not to say that implementing WebCT is effortless for an organization; there are significant costs for licensing, supporting hardware and software, and personnel resources necessary to ensure that it will integrate successfully into the established academic environment. One study at Western Carolina University regarding a potential switch from the current WebCT system to a competing product concluded that it was in the university’s best interest to stay with WebCT. The course system review team reached this conclusion because WebCT offered attractive features at a lower cost versus the competition, and the commitment of resources to the current WebCT system was simply too extensive to abandon without resulting in significant capital outlay costs (Western Carolina University 2002).

From my previous experience in a teaching assistant capacity, making a robust course available through WebCT is not difficult, but does require some familiarity with the system and guidance from a detailed manual or an experienced technical assistant. The basic functions of the course tools are fairly intuitive, but some unusual situations might require a more creative solution. There are a number of user-created web sites offering specific tips on WebCT use from an instructor perspective. Professor Dick Evans from Rhode Island College has used WebCT since the early 1990’s, and authors a site with white papers for questions he has encountered over the years and how he and his staff were able to resolve them within the WebCT system (Webct-tips blogspot).

**Vendors, Models & Costs**

While researching this section of my report, I discovered some interesting information that dramatically affected my conclusions regarding WebCT. I encountered difficulty when searching for pricing information, as the sites I found were either bad links with error messages (http://www.blackboard.com/company/sales.aspx), or directed users to enter their contact information for
follow up from a sales agent (http://www.webct.com/contact). Though frustrating from a research view, withholding pricing information is a wise strategic measure from the vendor’s perspective. A software system’s total cost is usually determined by the purchasing entity’s specific needs regarding number of users, networking setup, and other influential factors difficult to chart in a simple price list online. The cost for such a sophisticated network-based system could easily exceed $300,000 for initial implementation, plus over $40,000 in annual support fees; not the kind of price a vendor wants to quote without having a qualified sales agent to justify the expense in the client’s eyes (UF 2005 report, p. 26).

The lack of readily available pricing and purchasing information led me to delve deeper into the official company website, where I was surprised to learn that WebCT was acquired by rival Blackboard in 2006 (Blackboard Media Center press release 10/12/2006). This unexpected revelation led me to ponder a number of questions. If WebCT was purchased over 2 years ago by a competitor, why is it still readily accessible through UCF? Are institutions with current WebCT contracts still receiving technical support? Will WebCT be replaced by Blackboard as contracts expire, or are the two technologies dissimilar enough to market as a separate product? The answers to these questions are not entirely clear.

In reviewing my image captures within the UCF WebCT course, I noticed a few inconsistencies that suddenly made sense once I realized the companies had merged. For example, the Tab title on the WebCT window read “Blackboard” (see image below).

The use of the terms “old WebCT”, “new WebCT”, and the “Webcourses@UCF” moniker seemed odd when I first viewed the UCF WebCT information page (see image below). Clarification was found on the WebCT Wikipedia page, which indicated that the terms of the acquisition called for the WebCT name to be phased out gradually “in favor of the Blackboard brand” (Wikipedia, WebCT background). UCF’s seemingly fluid use of terms actually represented a conscious decision by the technology teams to minimize the sense of disruption that might be felt due to a change in systems, via a stealth approach to phasing in the new version. When perusing the WebCT CJE3001 course, I frequently thought about the remarkable similarities between this “new” system and my Blackboard course system. I
remembered the “old WebCT” being quite different in layout from Blackboard. Apparently, the “new” version is a veiled effort to transition users to Blackboard without initially announcing a system change.

Conclusion

In light of the merger, it appears that despite WebCT’s strength it was simply not able to out-compete Blackboard for a profitable majority market share. The merger of the two companies required approval of the US Department of Justice, because it could have potentially violated antitrust regulations due to the dominance of the two separate entities in the CMS industry (Inside Higher Ed, February 2006). A predicted estimate of the market share for the combined Blackboard & WebCT platforms was roughly two-thirds of the college and university E-Learning market, according to a report by the publication Inside Higher Ed (October 2005). Smaller vendors and open source platforms such as Moodle are becoming more popular, but many institutions prefer to work with a large vendor that offers integration with the many backbone systems required in a university technology infrastructure. WebCT has played a significant role in the early development of course management systems, but it appears that its time has passed. Hopefully, the merger will allow the some of the unique and exceptional features of WebCT to enhance future versions of Blackboard.
Web Directory

Introduction

Definition of Course Management System from Wikipedia
Definition of WebCT from Wikipedia
WebCT corporate homepage
Blackboard corporate homepage

Features

University of Central Florida, WebCT information page
UCF Learning Online page
UCF Student Guide to WebCT

Function and Application

Dr. Evans’ WebCT Tips blogspot
Western Carolina University, CMS Final Report of WebCT versus Blackboard

Vendors & Comparisons

University of Florida, WebCT 2005 review committee report
Blackboard and WebCT; merger announcement
US Department of Justice approves merger plan
Inside Higher Ed, antitrust review of merger
Inside Higher Ed, merger projections for market share