

Summary of Educause Roundtable Discussion

Courseware Delivery Systems: Coping with Meteoric Price Increases

Thursday, October 03, 2002 4:55 p.m. - 6:10 p.m. B409

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Attendance: Approximately 12 individuals representing institutions from various locations across the United States from Alaska to the Midwest to Georgia.

All participants were provided with the following handout to prompt discussion:

Courseware Delivery Systems: Coping with Meteoric Price Increases Educause 2002 – Current Issues Roundtable

An article that appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education this past April cited some academic-technology officials as saying that they're experiencing "sticker shock" over recent pricing changes by Blackboard and WebCT, two of the leading providers of course-management software. Yet, many of these same institutions have invested heavily in administrative applications over the years without much hesitation, justifying the acquisition as mission critical to the business of the institution.

At the same time the controversy over whether or not instructional applications, learning management systems, should be implemented as enterprise solutions continues. As recently as last week a noted speaker in a national forum suggested that higher education institutions and systems should not rally around a single application tool; rather faculty should be encouraged to seek the products they find suitable for their needs. Another educator remarked, life is not seamless and consistent, by allowing faculty to select their own applications, we are giving students what they will continue to experience in their daily lives.

Some pragmatic individuals will be quick to point out that more applications mean more support issues, more infrastructure requirements, more training. Further, they will argue that selecting a product and aggregating resources around that product facilitates more sharing, more building upon the work of others, more internal dialog with reductions in training, and of course, less infrastructure and associated maintenance and support. Not to be overlooked are increased emphases on integration capabilities across enterprise systems targeted at making the entire learning experience more seamless while increasing efficiencies for those who interact with the systems on a regular basis.

And then there is MIT's open knowledge initiative that sets as its goal the development of an open source platform for shared innovation – a new effort focused on developing an infrastructure that will adapt to emerging technologies and standards while allowing institutions to leverage existing infrastructure. It is intended to create a large collaborative community.

Some of you may see all of these choices as a dilemma of large proportions – others as an opportunity with significant implications – for education.

This session asks the question – How are you dealing with the meteoric price increases accompanying learning management systems?

1) We are paying the prices because – and we are handling the expense this way: – and we are justifying the expense as follows:

2) We are not paying them – we've opted to do the following:

One or many?

Enterprise level or shareware?

Individual or Group?

What do we really want out of the learning management systems? Do we want a convenient place for faculty to place their notes? A place for faculty to share the course syllabus? A place for students to interact with other students? Or do we want a tool that reduces redundant data entry by integrating easily with other student service applications? Do we want a tool that is easily used by faculty technology novices and experts alike, easily accommodating the needs of each level of technology sophistication? Do we want a tool that provides allow student performance tracking that can be aggregated across offerings to provide institutional assessments? Do we want a tool that allows us to do the education job better – with minimal upkeep and training on the users part?

Virtually every state is being impacted by revenue reductions and the associated budget impact. Every expenditure is undergoing closer scrutiny. Legislators are asking appropriate questions regarding redundant purchases and duplicate efforts. In Georgia the Governor recently remarked that buildings built with state dollars are state buildings – not institution buildings.

Given all how are institutions responding with selection, implementation, support and training of learning management systems?

Are there cost reduction opportunities? What are they?

What successes do you have to share?

What major issues are you confronting?

Discussion Summary

Discussion centered around what the represented institutions were doing with regard to their course management system. Many were feeling the need to make a decision over this next year regarding their course management system and were interested in learning from the experiences of others in the session. Approaches varied from institutions

recently switching from one major provider to another, from institutions unable to pressure vendors to reduce their prices or provide other participation options, to a successful system-wide approach across many institutions to increase functionality while reducing individual institution expenses. All agreed that they would be keeping an eye on the open source initiative of MIT to see how that evolves and its utility at their respective institutions.

There was no single “right” direction determined; however, there was important exchange that may result in more flexible thinking on the part of some of the institutions who were feeling constrained by price increases that were out of their control. Institutional partnerships, even those outside of systems, are beginning to emerge as cost saving strategies. Sharing of the infrastructure may open the doors to other sharing – services, perhaps even content modules.

Ideas were exchanged regarding important application features/functionality requirements, accurate product information, and future predictions and expectations. It became apparent throughout the discussion that institutions are not utilizing all the capabilities that the more sophisticated products offer. Additionally, there appeared to be misinformation regarding company plans and product development efforts. There was some discussion regarding being trapped by a particular vendor’s product; but those who had converted from one vendor to another indicated that it was not a difficult process from the content point of view.

All in the group recommended that this group meet again next year to see what decisions have been made by these institutions as well as how the course development landscape has changed.