

CMS PLATFORM COMPARISON WORKSHOP

SUNY Syracuse Training Center

Qualitative Analysis: *Discussion Results*

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ABOUT QUALITATIVE DATA

What follows below is an interpretation of the comments provided on the original data collection packets for the various sections of the workshop. Note that not all packets had comments in all areas. In fact, participants tended to offer more comments to those areas that offered the best and worst scenarios for them during the workshop. Therefore, the interpretation of this data is based only on those comments provided. Though for the most part comments were fairly consistent for in any given task, the lack of data in some comment fields by all participants may have an indirect influence on the interpretation provided below since the data was incomplete. The data, however, does provide ample evidence for some overall findings of this workshop and therefore the resulting information is both relevant and helpful in comparing the capabilities of the three course management systems evaluated (Blackboard, WebCT, and TopClass) as originally intended in the overall goals of the workshop. Except for the section on email, all task areas provided three comment fields for the following: other good making characteristics, other unique features, and additional comments. Themes from each of these areas are consolidated under each task below. The raw data accompanying this discussion includes all *legible* comments collected from each comment field prior to consolidation into common themes; there were a few instances where a participant's handwriting was indecipherable and therefore not included in either the raw data table or the final discussion. Comments included in the raw data that refer to problems logging or connecting to the appropriate servers are omitted from discussion here. Participant technical expertise with course management systems was not factored into the resulting interpretations provided herein.

CMS TASK UNIT 1: CREATE A SYLLABUS

Import text & other instructional materials

Simplicity and an intuitive interface were winning attributes throughout the daylong workshop among the three course management systems tested. These are especially important characteristics features when first setting up online course materials, such as the course syllabus. Difficulties here do not reflect well on any course management system, since the syllabus and related materials form the basis of any online course. Based on comments provided, Blackboard allowed users to import instructional materials with greater ease than either WebCT or TopClass. Moreover, for WebCT there was confusion over whether or not materials were imported properly and concern over the student's view of the materials. For TopClass, the confusion over HTML errors prompted several to complain, in addition to problems with how to import course materials. In contrast, there were no major problems with this task in Blackboard as indicated by the comments provided.

Modify Content Once Online

For faculty, time is at a premium to prepare materials for the online environment. Thus it is important for a course management system to facilitate the update of materials in as few steps as possible while still providing a robust environment for faculty to customize materials to their instructional needs. For this task, all three systems performed similarly, with minor differences for the majority of comments provided. Each system presented challenges to some participants in the process of editing their content online, a process that each could choose to avoid by uploading new files instead of editing them live, as some participants pointed out for each of the systems involved. More problems

were reported by those who modified the HTML code of their documents than those using a word processor to modify content for any of the three systems tested.

Import Graphics & Multimedia

The power of the online medium is the increased ability to use a variety of media to present information to students, thus maximizing the capabilities of the medium for the purposes of instruction. Clear differences existed in both the ability to import multimedia files and play or present them using the three systems tested here. As indicated by the majority of comments provided, there were virtually no problems incorporating multimedia and utilizing the files in the Blackboard environment. An intuitive Blackboard interface characterized most participant commentary for these tasks. In contrast, WebCT's interface prompted a majority of negative comments regarding either a plethora of choices, difficulty in the process involved, or problems utilizing the multimedia once imported. As for TopClass, nearly all comments indicated confusion in the process that required working with the HTML or an outright inability to perform the task of importing the files. For the few that were able to import multimedia files into TopClass (among those that reported comments) the presentation did not work online.

CMS TASK UNIT 2: LINKING

Create and Modify Links to External Web Sites

In addition to the use of electronic multimedia, linking to various sites and files is a basic feature of the online medium, however, participants reported challenges with all three systems when creating external links to online resources. Whereas Blackboard's process for adding links to the external links section was for the most part intuitive, like WebCT, there were problems creating links within a document of the course. In addition, WebCT presented additional barriers regarding the complexity of the interface and the process of creating the links. As for TopClass, the vast majority of comments indicated difficulty or failure to complete the task, in part because the participant interacted with the HTML code to achieve the intended result.

CMS TASK UNIT 3: APPLY SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION

Set-up Threaded Discussion Boards

The majority of comments in this section reflected the task of setting up small groups for online discussions. Once again Blackboard proved to be very intuitive and easy to use, with nearly all comments indicating the ease of use in setting up and utilizing discussion groups. WebCT was described as less intuitive with a more difficult interface for setting-up and using groups as compared to Blackboard. However, there were more favorable results for both of these systems in contrast to TopClass, in which several commentators felt lost and/or failed to complete the task. Moreover, there were no favorable comments provided on behalf of the TopClass environment for these tasks.

Send & Receive Email

Comments for these tasks were sparse compared to other sections, and most reflected the ability to tie this in with communication to small groups of students. A few of the comments favorably reflected on the option in Blackboard to use a student's Internet address, whether provided by the college or from some other outside service, a feature not applicable to WebCT or TopClass. In addition, Blackboard made it easy for participants to look up addresses by class and send email to select individuals, neither of which was as easily performed in either WebCT or TopClass, as indicated from the comments provided. However, there were problems for some with sending attachments in Blackboard, which appeared to be easier to do in WebCT and TopClass, although there was a dearth of comments provided on this subject.

Apply Chat & White Board

Synchronous communication in Blackboard is an integrated activity that allows for both chat and whiteboard interactions among participants from a single interface. Thus many comments were related from the two task areas and therefore are combined for interpretation for all three systems here. Aside from connection problems in WebCT, most comments indicated that participants liked both Blackboard and WebCT for their chat and whiteboard features. As mentioned, Blackboard integrates the chat and whiteboard into one interface for synchronous communication, whereas WebCT maintains a separate environment for each. Comments suggest both positive and negative experiences among participants where the feature is integrated in Blackboard and kept separate in WebCT. Moreover, the negative comments for Blackboard for the most part implied that the integration was not completely intuitive to the user, but once found, was an easy interface to work from. WebCT offered multiple chat rooms to participants, a feature not mentioned for Blackboard if it was available. To the frustration of participants who commented, TopClass had no such features integrated in the system to offer, and comments suggest they were unable to locate and apply either feature to complete the tasks assigned.

CMS TASK UNIT 4: GENERATE CUSTOMIZED FEEDBACK

Create & Administer Quizzes & Tests

The majority of comments for this section were targeted to the first part of the quiz building task, using different question types, rather than the task to customize quizzes based on student progress. All three systems presented barriers to quickly and easily creating online quizzes for some participants, with the bulk of comments reserved for the complexity of the WebCT quiz builder. However, there were many positive remarks for both Blackboard and WebCT, with Blackboard somewhat more intuitive and WebCT offering more features. None of the comments provided offered a truly positive perspective on the quiz building features of TopClass, however, the information provided here was meager for interpretation. From the comments it's clear some participants were unable to complete the tasks in either WebCT or TopClass; it's uncertain whether participants who complained about Blackboard were unable to complete the tasks in this section.

Attach & Open Student & Faculty Files Easily

Blackboard and WebCT offer similar versions of a virtual drop box feature allowing faculty and students to exchange files online; TopClass does not offer this type of feature. Again comments for TopClass were sparse for interpretation, but those provided indicate a high level of frustration with completing the tasks assigned. In contrast, the digital drop box in Blackboard appeared to be the most intuitive to participants, with a few comments indicating some difficulty in finding the feature. WebCT also provided a challenge to some to find the feature to exchange files, and a few participants also indicated confusion with the WebCT interface as compared to Blackboard. Moreover, comments suggest participants found WebCT easier to use than TopClass for these tasks despite the challenges with the WebCT interface.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

A few participants also entered final comments under Optional/Other Tasks. The majority of these comments indicated greater satisfaction with working in Blackboard as compared to WebCT or TopClass. In fact, the comments from all sections of the workshop indicate that Blackboard is more intuitive and easier to use even if you are a novice with the software. As one participant put it, "Blackboard knocks you out, WebCT and TopClass do not." WebCT appeared to these participants to offer too many choices or an interface that was more challenging to navigate to complete the tasks

assigned. Moreover, TopClass appeared to frustrate participants in nearly every task, as indicated by the comments provided. However, it is unclear as to whether doing the tasks in the order of Blackboard, WebCT, and then TopClass influenced the type and volume of comments provided in the TopClass comment fields. As mentioned above in this discussion, most of the packets provided sparse commentary for the features in TopClass. Also, the prior experience among participants with any of these systems is not taken into account when interpreting the comments provided, although occasionally novices with a particular system identified themselves as such. Overall, an intuitive interface appears to be a critical feature of any system given the nature of online instruction, the extra preparation time needed to organize course materials as compared to traditional face-to-face classes, and the instructional load of many professors today. No single piece of software can be all things to all instructors, but if this workshop (and the qualitative data provided) is any indication of the performance capabilities of current course management systems to measure up to the demands of the average instructor, then it is clear that Blackboard outperforms WebCT and TopClass in critical areas of online instruction. Moreover, this workshop provides a framework for comparing course management systems of the future, since instructional needs continue to evolve along with the software that attempts to meet new challenges of the academic environment. We are fortunate to have so many choices today for comparison that allows us to make more customized decisions as to what works best for our instructors. This level of competition brought Blackboard to the higher education market, and ensures we will continue to see innovations in the future that improve the experience for both educators and their students.