Classroom Communication on a Different Blackboard

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INTRODUCTION

Employing technology that students find enticing and will prepare them well for the future, may be easier than preparing the teachers who will integrate this technology into learning activities. Competition among educational institutions for students is increasing exponentially, which requires a greater sensitivity to student needs (Heckman & Guskey, 1998). Course management systems (CMSs) can build a framework for using technology as a technique of providing this responsiveness to students, predominantly in the form of communication. The aim is to ultimately create an environment conducive to teaching and learning via a technological community where students, faculty, adjunct instructors, staff, and administration can work together to achieve a common goal—produce quality graduates.

BACKGROUND

The Impact of Technology

According to some educational technology resources, technology clearly has had, and will continue to have, a major impact on education. Many institution segments are moving transactions and shared information into online communication channels, such as the Internet. The U.S. Department of Education explained that the development of the National Education Technology Plan is part of a long-range national strategy and guide for using technology effectively to improve student academic achievement—directly or through integration with other approaches to overall reform. The *No Child Left Behind Act* is raising standards for student achievement, giving students more information and more choices, requiring more accountability from schools, and funding education at record levels. The goals of the *No Child Left Behind Act* are as follows (Kozberg, 2002):

1. To improve student achievement using technology in elementary and secondary schools
2. To assist students in becoming technologically literate by the time they finish the eighth grade
3. To ensure that teachers are able to integrate technology into the curriculum to improve student achievement

Rod Paige, U.S. Secretary of Education, believes that "by harnessing technology, we can expand access to learning and close the achievement gap in America."

As stated in Vallone (2000):

Education is the fuel for the New Economy, and demand for online teaching and learning resources has already reached critical mass. Web-based and Web-enhanced courses are…already popular e-learning platforms in higher education today. According to Student Monitor, 90% of college students used the Internet last fall and 66% were connecting once a day or more often. According to Campus Computing, over 53% of college courses used e-mail last year, almost 39% used Internet resources, and almost 28% used Web pages for class materials and resources… (p. 1).

As education and technology continue to merge and evolve at rapid speed, institutions will find an enormous array of effective solutions to augment their educational offerings and build deeper relationships with current and prospective students, alumni, and administrators (Blackboard® Incorporated, 2001). CMSs are modifying the way instructors disseminate information. A growing number of campuses identify CMSs as "very important" in their institutional information technology planning, and approximately one-fifth (20.6%) of all college courses now use course management tools, up from 14.7% in 2000 (Green, 2001). A leading e-learning industry analyst firm projects that the higher education e-learning market will grow from $4 billion today to $11 billion by 2003 (Stokes, 2000).

Choosing the Technology

Tomei (2002, p. 5) explained that to succeed in technology implementation, we need to understand that the technology itself is not the goal. In deciding what technology will support the objectives or if a CMS can satisfy determined needs, consider the following:

- The benefit of a CMS to faculty and an institution is that it should provide instructors with a pre-made course Web template on which they can easily place, especially if they possess the computing skills and knowledge identified above, their course materials and activities.
- A CMS should service the majority of instructors and their curriculum needs and yet be flexible enough to provide advanced users with the basics upon which they can add further functionality and meet the needs of special and unique requests.
- A CMS should be cost-effective for the institution in terms of operating and support costs and resources.
- Not only are developer skills and understanding important, an institution must commit to effective infrastructure and strategic support of the CMS by ensuring that adequate support for users exists and that resources are available for hardware and software improvements and maintenance necessary for reliable operation of the CMS.

Currently, Blackboard has been able to meet the above criteria, and as its increased use by faculty and programs across campus indicates, it has become the preferred CMS at Duquesne University (see Table 1). The fourth column indicates the growing trend of professors who use Blackboard over the previous semester. Furthermore, when SOBA-Net was born, less than 12% of the School of Business faculty was using Blackboard to supplement their face-to-face courses. Now we have 88.4% of faculty participation. Regardless of which technology you choose, you must realize the implementation is an ongoing process that demands time, attention, and dedication.

METHODOLOGY

The History of SOBA-Net

The Duquesne University School of Business (SOBA) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is bridging the communication gap between students, faculty, and staff with an online community called **SOBA-Net** (School of Business Administration Network). Using the CMS, Blackboard®, as a portal, users find important information, communication, and resources for their programs. SOBA-Net is quickly becoming a tool on which students, faculty, and staff depend.

There is no doubt that technology has had a major impact on our daily lives. In summer 1999, Duquesne University adopted the Blackboard® CMS as a means to provide technological advancements to education. This system traditionally allows for teaching online, where colleges and universities all over the world are diving into the online education arena. For example, an instructor can use a CMS course site simply and easily for increasing the availability of course materials, assignments, resources, and grades. In an effort to meet student demands, this CMS was modified to build human relationships that allow students to take an active role in, and be held accountable for, their academic careers. Ultimately, the creation of SOBA-Net has taken the foundation of a CMS and altered it to become a school management system (SMS).

What is a School Management System and Portal?

A management information system is, according to Ox (2002), a computer-based system that supports managers and their subordinates in their daily work and strategic planning….managerial decisions and daily operations. An SMS manages a school's key functional data, including items such as staff and faculty data, class schedules, school guidelines, special programs, and other school information, and, depending upon the type of SMS implemented and the desired outcomes, the system can range from low-end to high-end capabilities. Many schools depend on integrated information systems to manage their data and provide detailed information that aids in the communication process (Blackboard® Incorporated, 2001).

A portal is not a new concept to the technology industry; in fact, www.yahoo.com and www.msn.com are two of the many organizations that have used portals from the beginning. Building an online community in Blackboard® has made it convenient for students to find the tools and resources they need to be successful in their academic careers. "In the Internet economy, people, process, and technology must be inextricably linked," explained Greg Baroni (1999, [Online]), national partner-in-charge of the KPMG higher education practice. "Portals

Table 1. Statistics for nondistance learning courses

Term	Total Courses	Unique Faculty	Increase
Fall 2003	255	142	15%
Spring 2003	221	121	12%
Fall 2002	197	109	