

Faculty Senate Information Technology Committee Minutes

March 23, 2011

Present: Bob Wren, Sunay Palsole, Bryan Usevitch, Nigel Ward, Carolyn Awalt, Brian Giza, Jose Hernandez, Mike Sifuentes

The Minutes of the February meeting were approved.

Blackboard Support

Sunay reported that we have had 27/7 support for students in Blackboard (only) since August 2010, from Presidium, a Blackboard subsidiary that will become an integrated service in the future, and the link is available for 100% online courses only.

The big issue last year was constant crashing and failure of Blackboard due to an inadequate application server. The new solution is a virtual with some redundancy. The number of calls has gone down this semester.

Blackboard Future

In 2012 the Blackboard company will be demoting the Blackboard service as they phase out CE8. Our options include:

- (1a) Move to Blackboard Learn, self hosted,
- (1b) Move to Blackboard Learn hosted solution
- (2) migrate to moodle or another open source solution, again either locally managed or a hosted solution, e.g. MoodleRooms
- (3) migrate to DesireToLearn or another third party solution
- (4) migrate to ECollege, which has the disadvantage of being owned by a textbook company.

UT System Initiatives

As a digression, discussion occurred about outsourcing distance learning in the UT System. Brian expressed a concern about what might be imposed. Sunay, who sits on the distance learning initiative, clarified some of these issues. Mike brought up Utalk, and discussed this with Sunay

There is also a conversation at the System level about whether there is a financial benefit to a System-wide solution.

Choosing how to replace Blackboard and sundry issues

Three years ago the three systems WebCT CE6, Blackboard, and Moodle were tested (prior to the purchase of WebCT by the Blackboard company), and we decided at that point to stay with WebCT, in part because it was also platform used by EPCC. Sunay reported that Moodle is stable and robust and may be best implemented when outsourced.

Cost issues were then briefly discussed. It was noted that the primary migration costs involve with pain of training the users (faculty in particular) in moving from Blackboard CE8 to blackboard Learn. Bryan Usevitch noted that the University of Houston went with a open-source solution, with intent to save money over time. Sunay noted that the Blackboard cost is \$70,000 per year and this includes options for P3. (A hosted solution for Blackboard would cost \$240,000, not including support for P3.) Moodle

Rooms if brought on board would also have a restrictive license.

Brian noted that Professional and Public Programs (P3, sometimes also called Extension and/or Continuing Education) should be considered a stakeholder, and they might need to provide input too. Sunay: they are not part of the academic negotiated site license, but possibly could be, for extra cost. Brian noted that having P3 run a system different from the academic one would be confusing to students etc.

There are 3 applications in moodle that blackboard does not have: a Second Life plugin, a community builder in moodle (there's an analogous package for Blackboard but it's a separate 3rd party package), and a multimedia authoring tool. Regarding the last point, Brian noted that there is a Swedish program that does online video editing and volunteered to send information to the other members of the committee.

A key consideration is interface with Banner.

Regarding possible testing of the options, Sunay noted that it is probably possible to get some transition or testbed versions of Blackboard Learn. IIS currently has a moodle as a testbed but it is small.

Committee Role

Sunay noted that the decision we have to make is whether to stay with Blackboard or go to alternatives, also to consider whether the cost savings of doing local hosting outweigh the hassle factor.

The committee agreed to work to give Sunay a recommendation, with the caveat that we will focus on the academic/user perspective, not the financial implications, and so, since he will have all the information, that the final decision will still be his.

Sunay indicated that we need to have the solution in place by September 1, meaning that the committee ought to give him a recommendation by the end of the semester.

Several committee members volunteered to try out Moodle and the new Blackboard, and to report back to the committee by the next meeting.

April 20 will be the next meeting

by Brian Giza and Nigel Ward