

Chapter 12

Choosing the Right Course Management System for Distance Education Courses

Zafer Unal

University of South Florida – St. Petersburg, USA

Aslihan Unal

Usak University, Turkey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the current market space there are many commercially available Course Management Systems (CMS) from which to choose, such as BlackBoard and Desire2Learn. The open source community has also been active in creating alternative course management system choices that are free of licensing costs (Moodle, Sakai). Institutions now have the choice between these competing CMSs, and it is not enough to just pick a package based on its price or feature list. Institutions considering implementing a CMS must carefully evaluate it before putting it to use with a student population. A trial was undertaken to consider whether Moodle warranted a more formal consideration as an alternative to the institution's current CMS (BlackBoard) at a southeastern university. This report documents a detailed comparison of BlackBoard and Moodle CMSs based on students' experiences that used both systems during the same course and investigates if Moodle warrants consideration as an alternative to the institution's current course management system.

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ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Opened in 1965 as a satellite campus of the University of South Florida, the USF St. Petersburg gained accreditation as a separate entity starting in the 2006-2007 school year. USF St. Petersburg is the only public university in Pinellas County and the only public university offering bachelors and graduate degree programs in the area. USF St. Petersburg enrolled 3,973 students during the fall 2010 semester. Students across the USF System enroll at USF St. Petersburg, creating a typical semester student population of more than 6,000. USF St. Petersburg has three colleges that offer both Bachelors and Masters Degrees: the College of Art and Sciences, the College of Business, and the College of Education.

SETTING THE STAGE

Providing quality education requires that university administrators manage enrollment to maintain institutional integrity, while faculty must ensure effective and efficient delivery of instruction, effective communication with students, and collaboration between students and lecturers. Like all electronic technologies, CMSs are constantly evolving. This evolution imposes the need for continuous evaluation, consideration of alternatives, and appraisal of the resources and opportunities currently available. USF St. Petersburg has been using Blackboard as a CMS for a number of years. The Blackboard CMS is an intuitive and easy-to-use academic software program dedicated to the advancement of teaching and learning through technology. Academic staff and students are familiar with using this tool within various courses. The IT Support (ITS) staff is also very experienced in the administration and maintenance tasks involved with this system. However, numerous problems (listed below) were reported by students and faculty with the use of BlackBoard over the time. This warranted a study for trying out a new Course Management System (Moodle) for exploration and comparison of user experience.

CASE DESCRIPTION

Course Management Systems

A Course Management System (CMS), such as Blackboard, Blackboard Vista (formerly WebCT), Desire2Learn and Moodle provides a place for learning and teaching activities to occur within a seamless environment (Burrell-Ihlow, 2009; Ullman & Rabinowitz, 2004). It enables instructors and learners to post content,

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