Chapter 3.14
Online Learning with the Use of WebCT Vista

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ABSTRACT

The primary goal of this chapter is to offer reflections on various aspects of the use of WebCT Vista in online business education at Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia, U.S. The chapter argues that with the proper systems in place, including adequate technology and support and the cooperation of educational administrators, WebCT Vista can augment current educational systems in remarkable ways. The chapter also argues that the use of WebCT strongly contributes to the effectiveness of distance learning by improving the quality of students' learning in the areas of critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, attention to detail, written communications, and organizational and analytical skills. The assessment tool presented in this chapter was used to obtain students' feedback concerning their learning outcomes with and without the use of WebCT Vista. In general, most students positively evaluated the effect of WebCT Vista on their learning within areas such as critical thinking, problem solving, decision making ability, oral communication, written communication, knowledge of information, and the ability to organize and analyze. As the results of this analysis indicate, almost all students benefited from using WebCT.

INTRODUCTION

Today, many college students can complete their education without setting foot onto the college campus (Hutchins, 2001; Lynch, 2002). Online education has become an effective and efficient pedagogical tool that can be integrated successfully into college curricula as the standard method of distance learning (Lane, 2001; Lu &

Chun-Sheng, 2003). Courses offered through the Internet using Blackboard, WebCT, and WebCT Vista allow students more flexibility to learn at their own pace as their schedules permit, reduce or eliminate travel time, and provide additional opportunities for reviewing course materials while being distant from in-class lectures (Kendall, 2001).

WebCT or WebCT Vista (the most recently updated version of WebCT) open educational access to nontraditional and geographically distributed students and can improve the overall educational process by reducing time, labor, and costs (Lichtenberg, 2001). Numerous studies have been conducted and show that the rich environments of Blackboard, WebCT, or WebCT Vista:

1. Promote study and investigation within authentic, realistic, meaningful, relevant, complex, and information-rich contexts (Hutchins, 2001; Wentzell, 2002);
2. Encourage the growth of student responsibility, self-motivation, initiative, decision making, and intentional learning (Smith, Ferguson, & Caris, 2001);
3. Cultivate an atmosphere of cooperative learning among students and teachers (Meyer, 2003);
4. Generate learning activities that promote written communication (Lynch, 2002);
5. Develop level thinking process (i.e., analysis, synthesis, critical thinking, decision making abilities, problem solving, experimentation, and creativity among many others) (McEwan, 2001; Scott, 2003); and
6. Enhance the quality of learning by enabling students to take new and more active roles in their learning process. (Smith & Rose, 2003; Smith et al., 2001)

It is clear that these tools provide real educational benefits and can be a valuable addition to any portfolio of teaching techniques.

Marshall University is a state-supported university providing undergraduate and graduate programs at several locations throughout West Virginia. The enrollment at Marshall is approximately 16,000 students, including 4,000 graduate and medical students. A major goal of Marshall University is to create teaching excellence by enriching student skills in communication, critical thinking, and problem solving to ensure that all students receive the best possible instruction. The Lewis College of Business offers business and economics courses through traditional classroom delivery and distance education to students in rural communities in West Virginia. The distance education program is comprehensive in that it enables students to obtain undergraduate business degrees without coming to campus. The primary mode of course delivery, before introduction of WebCT Vista, was a satellite course or instruction based on an e-mail system. While these techniques allowed the delivery of courses to remote areas, each lacked certain features necessary for a comprehensive program.

Marshall University introduced WebCT in beta format in the fall of 1996 as a test project. In the fall of 1997, the university officially adopted WebCT as its Web-based course delivery tool. Marshall University's electronic course policy states that all e-course materials are to be housed and used on Marshall University's WebCT server, so that the university can provide common support for course developers, instructors, and students taking courses from Marshall University. This university-wide standardization has facilitated a more efficient and cost-effective use of computers and distance-learning software.

Marshall currently has more than 1,000 courses that use or have used WebCT Vista for curriculum delivery. Twenty-seven of these were fully online courses for the fall 2000 semester. Over 12,000 students used WebCT for the delivery of instructional material since 2000. Of this number, more than 3,000 were enrolled in WebCT courses for the fall 2001 semester. All online distance

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