FCJ-008 WebCT: Will the Future of Online Education be User-friendly?

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The impetus for this paper comes from two related events: the first is my initial contact with the online education 'courseware' package or Managed Learning Environment (MLE) called Web Course Tools (commonly abbreviated as WebCT); and the other is the University of Western Australia's (UWA's) purchase of a campus-wide site license for WebCT and the resulting expectation that all e-learning at UWA will be standardised via WebCT mediated delivery. There are a number of reasons for the decision to manage all course content using WebCT and the IT policy section of the UWA website illuminates some of these:

> The future of online learning at UWA is towards [sic] an enterprise-wide approach and away from a "cottage industry" approach, whilst retaining and harnessing the considerable skills and enthusiasm demonstrated in the relatively high level of use of online materials achieved to date.
>
> The Learning Management System WebCT has become a centrally supported platform for all staff to use, in order to encourage greater consistency, portability and durability of online learning materials. (University of Western Australia, 2003)

Interpreting this statement and the extended policy from which it is drawn, the reasoning behind the campus-wide WebCT purchase can be broken down into economic, managemental and pedagogical motivations. Economically, the centralisation of all e-delivery using one platform means that the one price paid supposedly covers the entire university's needs. Extending this economic rationale, the smaller scale or so-called "cottage industry" e-learning packages – such as The Forum (https://forum.uwa.edu.au) and Jellyfish (https://fish.mech.uwa.edu.au) – are thus viewed as superfluous and they are no longer developed, funded or supported. Managementally, centralisation means that all staff training can be standardised and that all support services for the MLE can be handled centrally rather than needing discipline specific or faculty level WebCT support. In more specific administration terms, one platform also allows Student Administration automatically to grant and deny access to specific courses on the basis of student enrolment. WebCT is also an "enterprise-wide" platform in that it both covers all areas of the university and also is thought to have all the tools necessary for the needs of all teaching and learning areas. Finally, pedagogically, the argument is made that one portal and platform will be easier for students and staff to access and learn rather than potentially having to use several different e-learning interfaces. While economic, managemental and pedagogical reasons are all related, reading the UWA IT Policy does suggest that pedagogy is being driven by economic rationale rather than the other way around.

Before continuing to analyse some of the specific features of WebCT, I want to emphasise that this paper contains my initial reaction to WebCT; while I have had the opportunity to participate in a course delivered via WebCT and have been given an overview of the design interface for course construction, I have not extensively developed course material using the MLE. The observations and concerns raised in this paper are tentative and subject to change as the situation at UWA necessitates deeper engagement with the platform. However, in this paper I hope to utilise the naiveté of my engagement with WebCT to ask some broader questions about the politics of the package that for some more experienced users may get obscured by the processes and investment of using and designing courses with WebCT.

Initial Comparisons

At this point I want to contextualise my engagement with WebCT and make explicit that I am examining WebCT after previously using an alternative e-learning delivery system called The Forum. The Forum was designed and run by the Multimedia Centre at the University of Western Australia and has been the delivery system for the majority of units in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. The Forum is certainly not as large a package as WebCT, and its more streamlined design is restricted to information and content delivery. After initially logging in, students are presented with four main options. The first is the 'Notice Board' which opens by default and contains any additional important notices or messages from the unit coordinator. The second option is 'Unit Work', which contains copies of the course outlines, any additional

handouts, as well as anything else the course coordinator wishes to post, such as supplementary web pages. The third option is 'Recordings' which gives students access to digital recordings of the lectures using the students' choice of either the Realplayer or QuickTime media plug-in programs. And the last main section is the 'Bulletin Board' which allows access to a Bulletin Board system which may or may not be utilised formally in the course.

8 For those already familiar with WebCT, two major differences will be apparent: firstly, that The Forum is a very small suite limited to delivering content; and secondly, that The Forum does not have any assessment tools such as the option to design quizzes or to facilitate student submission of assessment in electronic form.

Size: Is Bigger Really Better?

9 Ostensibly, the size and complexity of a fully-fledged courseware package such as WebCT appears self-justified since the size correlates with the amount of different functions that package can perform. For courses which are mainly taught online and which make use of the package to deliver content, facilitate discussion through chat or bulletin board type environments and which utilise assessment tools, WebCT probably appears (and may very well be) the ideal choice. However, what about units which use online delivery only as a supplement to traditional techniques? There are, for example, a considerable number of units in the Discipline of English, Communication and Cultural Studies at UWA which limit their online presence to the delivery of course handouts and lectures in electronic form as a secondary resource in case students are unable to make scheduled lecture times. For these units, WebCT may be less appealing for a number of reasons. For one, the course coordinator will need to familiarise themselves with the content creation tools in order to use WebCT even if they only wish to put a tiny amount of information online. This difficulty is often exacerbated because many educational institutions insist that staff must take a course on WebCT before they can use it for their units.

10 While a sound idea in principle, these courses regularly run upwards of four hours and the length can often prevent already busy staff from becoming WebCT qualified. Alternatively, if unit coordinators do spend considerable amounts of time learning to use WebCT, often the temptation is to try and justify the time by creating extra electronic content and "try out" the package, even if that extra content is, in all fairness, of very little benefit to students. Similarly, becoming WebCT qualified rather than more general training on e-learning principles gives the impression that everything that educators need to know about online education is addressed by understanding WebCT. The platform is, in effect, driving pedagogy. Moreover, the idea that a single American platform is sufficient for the specific needs of an Australian university points to the increasingly monopolistic and US-centred deployment of educational software. By contrast, a more critical approach would see teaching methodology scrutinized and evaluated with the potentials uses of MLEs in mind, and only after careful consideration would specific platforms be investigated. However, the current trends in the Australian tertiary sector of increasing staff workloads and larger classroom sizes combined with more administrative responsibilities mean that even finding time to attend a basic WebCT course is optimistic for many educators.

11 From a student perspective, WebCT's size can also have a downside. When students initially log in to WebCT they are presented with a 'myWebCT' page which is basically their personalised doorway to the courseware package. This page is very full, containing links to courses in which the student is enrolled, a campus-wide notice board, several (non-customisable) links to WebCT's American homepage, bookmarks which can be altered by the student, institutionally defined bookmarks, help options and so forth. From a design perspective, this first page suffers from "information overload" since the number of options can be quite overwhelming. However, once students are comfortable with the variety of choices, there are other issues. The ability to create and manage bookmarks – that is, links to other websites – can be very distracting as with other customisation options. The underlying architecture of the page is similar to that of customisable homepages elsewhere on the Internet, such as the interface for the commercial Yahoo!™ web portal. While not a concern in itself, having an e-learning package homepage that is specifically designed to encourage users to utilise WebCT for personal reasons, such as storing bookmarks and maintaining a personal calendar, does raise the question whether there should be some sort of boundary between educational and personal use online. Also, going back to the example of

courses which use e-learning tools in a fairly limited way, students run the risk of spending as much time tinkering with the options of WebCT as they do actually looking at course content.

Design Tools: Inward or Outward Facing?

12 I want to turn now to look at the way course content is written in and transferred onto the WebCT platform. WebCT comes complete with course creation tools which are accessible only to the course coordinator and which allow differing degrees of design and flexibility. The WebCT corporate "white paper" advertises that with these tools, 'professors needn't become Web programmers' (WebCT, 2002B) to create online content. These tools are similar to 'What You See Is What You Get' or WYSIWYG online development programs which simplify web page construction, meaning users do not have to learn the underlying hypertext markup language (HTML). Obviously, not having to learn HTML is an advantage in terms of time. However, most WYSIWYG programs acknowledge that it is still important for designers to have the choice of examining the code they are producing, which can usually be displayed at the click of a button (the Macromedia design package Dreamweaver is an excellent example of the dual view, in that it can display both 'code' and 'design' windows simultaneously). This option allows designers to track, scrutinise and over time comprehend how HTML (or, indeed, XML or whichever language designers are utilising) works. These tools are thus outward facing in that their design allows users to become fluent in the basic language of the Internet and thus gain an understanding and skills which can be used across a wide range of different programs. In contrast, WebCT's course construction tools have no such flexibility. WebCT's tools are thus inward facing in that learning to use these tools is only of use when designing within the WebCT environment. While inward facing tools may appear a fairly minor gripe, I contend that it is an indicative of the corporate mentality which drives the WebCT package; these tools do not teach generic skills, but rather WebCT skills and thus serve to shore up WebCT's continued use since users would have to expend time learning new skills if they were to use any other program. WebCT's tools are, in effect, driven by a philosophy of corporate monopolism.

Surveillance: Who Watches the Students?

13 Another of WebCT's troubling features, and the one most often commented on in critical literature, is the imbedded surveillance of students (Merrick and Willson, 2001; Brent, 2001; Mullen, 2001; Land and Bayne, 2002). As Helen Merrick and Michele Willson point out, WebCT tracks students use in a number of ways:

14 > The number of times that they visit content pages are noted, the date and time of their last access is noted, as are the number of postings that they have made and/or the breakdown of these into original and follow-on posts [as well as] … when they last accessed a page, and what pages they have accessed. (2001: 247-8)

15 The large quantity of surveillance data recorded against each student is easily accessible to course coordinators in the form of tables and graphs generated internally by WebCT. Even if this information is not directly accessed for each student, a disclaimer is usually issued to students making them aware of the possibility. These types of surveillance correlate with Michel Foucault's concept of panoptic surveillance wherein individuals act as if they were always being surveyed due to the possibility that they might be surveyed at any time (Foucault, 1979). Even if course coordinators choose never to examine information gathered by WebCT, the possibility that they could do so may have the same effect. Mark Mullen has extended this concept and argues that the surveillance possibilities of MLEs such as WebCT and the major competitor Blackboard, actually illuminate a 'pedagogy of suspicion' which emphasises the need to watch and punish students rather than encouraging students' personal responsibility for learning (2001). Indeed, if such information is regularly available, will course coordinators be able to choose not to access it? In the era of increasing litigation in which we live, there is often an expectation that so-called responsible use of information means that if available it must be accessed and if needs be, acted upon. If course coordinators become aware that students never spend more than five minutes on readings, will they be required to chastise the student? Will tutors have to make sure students make a minimum number of posts in any given bulletin board topic? These and other questions raised by WebCT's imbedded surveillance could have serious ramifications for the activities and responsibilities of educators. Although, it should be noted, these concerns seem to construct a

fairly monolithic top-down reading of WebCT. Laterally thinking students who are aware of the surveillance in WebCT may be canny enough to subvert this system, for example, by logging onto pages and leaving them open while doing other things, thus appearing to have read their course content for long periods of time.

Corporate Education?

16 As mentioned earlier, there is considerable evidence of the corporate mentality driving the design and operation of WebCT. Students are presented with customisable homepages to encourage repeated and often personal use, and the associated course construction tools are useful and develop skills exclusive to the WebCT framework. Of more serious concern, however, is the development of WebCT's 'e-Packs'. E-Packs are pre-packaged WebCT-based courses which according to WebCT's homepage come 'including video animations, sample syllabi, lecture notes, quiz and test banks, and glossaries, all combined with the functionality of WebCT's e-learning solution' (WebCT, 2002A). While academic colleagues often share course material with one another, the idea of buying a complete ready-made course is of a different magnitude altogether. Indeed, the combination of WebCT's dominance of the courseware market and the increasing development of e-Packs has the potential to impact heavily on new course construction. Given the increasing workload of many educators, the temptation to purchase and run an e-Pack based course rather than develop a new course from scratch and transfer it onto WebCT, could prove too great. And despite WebCT's emphasis on the flexibility and customisation options of e-Packs, working from the same material would inevitably homogenise tertiary teaching and learning. While the common use of e-Pack courses may appear a rather far-fetched or paranoid scenario, the potential is there and should at least be examined. More to the point, if e-Packs do get utilised in some universities and these institutions manage, in effect, to construct courses in a quarter of the time it would normally take, then the pressure on others to follow suit would no doubt increase. The combination of modular pre-packaged courses with the economic rationalism and bottom line managementalism could potentially homogenise course content in ways unheard of before large-scale courseware packages; e-learning may become simply rebranded and packaged homogeneous *e-delivery*.

Some Thoughts for the Future

17 In concluding this exploratory paper, I want quickly to summarise the features of WebCT which I find of most concern:

18 1. WebCT's bulk can be a burden for courses only utilising partial online delivery.

19 2. The customisation options from the student side may encourage procrastination and WebCT being used in ways which routinely deflect students away from core teaching and learning objectives.

20 3. The course construction tools are inwardly and exclusively WebCT-oriented and do not teach outward facing generic skills.

21 4. The imbedded surveillance options can substantially infringe on student privacy.

22 5. E-Packs and other modular options may potentially homogenise tertiary teaching and learning.

23 I should qualify that these concerns focus on the negative side of WebCT and while the program has its problems, it can be very useful if used in a reflexive way, keeping its potential flaws in mind. Certainly e-learning has the potential to enhance teaching and learning experiences, as long as tackled in a critical manner. However, the development of better options should not simply be restricted to making the most of WebCT. As the growing trend in Australian universities of using the open source Linux operating system instead of Microsoft's Windows demonstrates, there are alternatives being developed and they may prove superior to even the most dominant products. If the money spent on licenses and support for the American WebCT package in Australian universities was channelled into the continued development and improvement of existing local programs then a better option might be found right here at home.

Author's Biography

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