BB Committee Meeting Notes, 25 Feb 2008

Notes by JQ Johnson, 26 Feb 2008

The Blackboard Committee met on 25 Feb. Attendees included Deborah Bauer, Herb Chereck, John Fenn, Michael Hennessy, JQ Johnson, Skipper Mcfarlane, Deborah Olson, Michael Pangburn, Richard Troxel, Robert Voelker-Morris, Tim Boshart, Tim Ketchum, Nargas Oskui,

Status update. Some additions to the draft status document of 22 Feb included:

- JQ distributed a copy of the Chronicle of Higher Ed article that appeared in the 25 Feb issue, about Blackboard’s success in patent litigation against Desire2Learn.
- JQ noted that in conversation with Law School (Dennis Bishop) he had tentatively scheduled Blackboard 8 training for Law faculty for April 22 or 23.
- Tim noted that the performance of the new database hardware has been excellent. Tim created spring term courses the morning of 25 Feb. That process usually takes about 3 hours to complete, but this year took only 1 hour.

A copy of the status report and this update document are available at http://libweb.uoregon.edu/cet/blackboard/advisory.html.

The group reviewed JQ’s status report and provided several comments. For example, consensus was that the new RT trouble ticketing system seems to be working.

Upgrade Schedule

Committee discussed the schedule for upgrades to Blackboard 8.0, and several members expressed concern about radical changes to the gradebook that might introduce more new bug than it fixed. We concluded that the best approach would be to bring up Blackboard 8 on our test server a bit earlier than originally planned, perhaps by beginning of spring term, to give members of the committee and support personnel some exposure to the new grade center. We will also evaluate stability of the new version as other campuses start adopting it; currently only a handful of campuses, mostly those who were involved in the Beta program such as Kettering U and U Toronto, have deployed Blackboard 8 in production. We don’t know yet whether there will be a version 8.1 released before summer, though there will certainly be hotfixes for miscellaneous bugs. Tentative upgrade schedule is still Aug 16, 2008, but we will re-evaluate during spring with the possibility of deferring upgrade until winter break 2008 or August 2009.

Respondus futures

The group also expressed some concern about the proposal to drop the campus-wide Respondus license. Conclusion was to explore replacing the campus license with a single copy in CET Consulting.
Training

There didn’t seem to be much concern about the proposed schedule for general Blackboard 8 training, assuming we stay with the overall plan of an upgrade on Aug 16. Workshop based training would focus during spring on Blackboard committee, Law faculty, and support staff, with broader-based training for other faculty during late August and September. We expect that the average faculty member will either be able to adapt to the new version without assistance or will need an hour or so of training to adjust to the new grade center interface.

We also discussed more general training approaches for faculty, and Rick Troxel argued that we should invest in producing some Camtasia or SnapzPro style screencasts describing local features and answering frequently asked questions. The Blackboard-provided training videos available on the My UO screen are seen as ok but suboptimal, in part because they are video-only and in part because they are not customized for our local environment.

Tim attempted to show a screencast video about the Blackboard 8 grade center that had been developed by Kettering Univ. However, we concluded that due to technical difficulties it was better if interested committee members watch it on their own. It is available at http://tinyurl.com/3dco7w in RealPlayer format; unfortunately, support for RealPlayer on campus is dwindling rapidly so that may not be a good format for delivering such training materials.

Finally, we briefly addressed the problem of providing better training and support for students, particularly students at remote locations. This is not an easy problem, and is one that we will be facing more and more with the growth of distance ed programs and of branch campus such as Portland White Stag building.

Student evaluations

Herb raised a new issue, the question of what the role of Blackboard should be in implementing the new online process for student evaluations. This has been discussed in the Undergraduate Council; see http://www.uoregon.edu/~ucouncil/minutes/06-07/Minutes_UGC_11152006.htm (and discussed but not approved by the Senate). Although I haven’t yet found where the Senate approved the plan, I believe the expectation is that student final grades will be withheld until the student turns in a course evaluation form. This impacts Blackboard if gradebook information in blackboard is considered to include a final grade. I had previously believed that any Blackboard grades, including a summative total, were preliminary, and that only the actual grade submitted by the instructor of record to DuckWeb was an actual “final grade.” Herb disagrees. Under his interpretation it may be necessary to change grade distribution practices to discourage faculty from providing any sort of overall indication of how well the student has done in the course. As a short run expedient, JQ will contact Brad Shelton, who is spearheading the new online course evaluation system, to discuss. In addition, JQ will craft a message to all faculty who use Blackboard this term suggesting that they avoid posting in their Blackboard gradebooks any item that students would
reasonably interpret as a course final grade (for example, a column that was advertised as being identical to the data the instructor submitted to DuckWeb).

**Sponsored accounts for visiting lecturers**

There was some discussion of the current state of affairs with regard to providing Blackboard access for short-term visitors who are assisting in a UO course. Herb noted that, as JQ had previously reported, a group had met this month to provide Noreen Hogan with guidance on accounts and IdM policy. Herb stated that his understanding was that this was a one-time meeting rather than an ongoing policy group. He noted that the group had discussed Blackboard-related issues. The group had agreed that there should not be a fee for short-term sponsored accounts, though there might be a fee for longer term accounts. The group when it met had significant concerns about license compliance, but as I’ve already noted my followup conversations with Randy Geller have alleviated those concerns – Randy’s bottom line conclusion is that “You are the person at the University responsible for compliance with the license. I merely provide advice about compliance. It's your call.” As I’ve noted, I’d be quite comfortable with a mechanism that would allow Blackboard access by “collaborating researchers” for the purpose of assisting with specific courses.

In addition to the issue of sponsored accounts, which may require some further discussion with Russ Tomlin, Information Services has recommended the creation of a workflow that would grant Blackboard access to some but not all UO temporary and student employees, perhaps with Herb acting as gatekeeper.

We didn’t really identify concrete next steps. Herb recommended a meeting of JQ, Herb, and Noreen to discuss next steps. I would expect that that meeting would at least address the question of a workflow for temporary employees. In addition, I recommend that a meeting be scheduled with Russ Tomlin to discuss broader issues.

**Other Issues**

Rick Troxel reported on a survey of his faculty that had identified 3 additional concerns that the faculty have with the Blackboard system:

Facebooks. The UO does not provide student photos to instructors (except in Law), but providing facebook would be particularly valuable, particularly in large courses. Blackboard would be a natural place for such facebooks, and indeed is used for that purpose by several other universities. Herb believes that this should not be a Blackboard function, but that providing such facebooks is desirable. This is an approach that has been taken at several colleges including Grinnell, Bucknell, Kettering, and Princeton. JQ suggests several next steps:

- Herb should consider whether “directory information” at UO could be extended to include student photos.
- JQ and Tim should get more data about other institutions that provide facebooks through blackboard.
- In the meantime, faculty interested in having such information should consider other approaches, such as a first-week familiarization assignment in which all
students are required to submit a 3x5 card with an illustration or photo and a brief comment about themselves.

**Timed exams.** Rick also noted that faculty report problems with timed exams. Depending on student browser settings the timer may not display, and some students apparently have the false impression that they don’t need to actually submit their exams before the timer expires – they think the timer expiration automatically submits. Tim and JQ will work on a FAQ and on user education in this area.

**Majors.** Rick also reports continued dissatisfaction with the way the UO accounts for changes of major. As Herb noted, a change of major request filed during a term does not take effect until the end of the term, but departments and students for many purposes want the request to have immediate impact, for example in order to make sure that the new majors get notification of important major-related information and that students who have dropped a major stop getting spammed. There doesn’t seem to be much we can do about this, though JQ notes that the new budget model reduces the number of major-specific fees, and so may reduce the need for the delays that the Registrar needs to incorporate into the change of major process.

**Next meeting**

The next meeting of the full Blackboard committee will occur during spring term, probably in late April.