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Jon Baggaley

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Technical Evaluation Reports Series

Jon Baggaley

Series Editor, Technical Evaluation Reports

Professor of Educational Technology

Centre for Distance Education

Athabasca University – Canada's Open University

Introduction

Modern distance education (DE) is increasingly dependent on the software available for communication between students and teachers. A wide range of online communication products is available, and competitive claims made by suppliers can be bewildering. Currently, particular growth is being observed in the development of synchronous (real-time) communication methods, added to the existing array of asynchronous communication methods such as email and online bulletin boards. The task of selecting appropriate products in this competitive environment is increasingly complex.

Athabasca University's Centre for Distance Education (CDE) addresses the issue of software evaluation in several of its Master's courses. In activities illustrating the importance of the evaluation process in online education, the students of these courses rate the merits and shortcomings of competing software products. Their conclusions are shared on a public software evaluation website: (<http://cde.athabascau.ca/softeval/>), in order to help other distance educators and students to select appropriate course development and delivery methods. The CDE maintains and updates the evaluation site as a collaborative activity by its faculty and graduate students.

The site is currently amassing comparative data on three types of online educational product:

- Computer-mediated (text-based) conferencing software
 - Internet audio-conferencing software
 - Course management systems
- In each of the above categories, the site contains:
- Definitions of major technologies and techniques
 - An index of currently available products
 - A survey index used by CDE students to enter their software ratings
 - Reports of their conclusions for the benefit of the international DE community

It is expected that new product categories will be added as the site continues to evolve. Highest priority is given to software that it is downloadable from the Internet and useable at no cost. The selection of software reviewed on the site is completely impartial; and those involved in the site's development have no commercial interest in any of the products reviewed. The reviewers do not claim that their selection of software is exhaustive, and suggestions for products to be added to the site's review base are welcomed.

In assessing the perceived need for the evaluation website, the CDE conducted an online study of its graduate students' interest in collaborative tools generally. The conclusions (by Tom Kane) are summarised, following the first report in this series.

